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Behind the Scenes of Independent Media: Production Dynamics and Regulatory Challenges in The Malaka Project

I Kadek Candika Wira Angga[1], Hafiz Bimo Nugroho[1], Bayu Wira Handyan[1], Deo Agung Sembada[1], Mohamad Nur Khotib[1]

[1]Departement of Communication, Faculty of Social and Political Science, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia

e-mail: i.kadek.candika.wir-2024@fisip.unair.ac.id[1*]; hafiz.bimo.nugroho-2024@fisip.unair.ac.id[1]; bayu.wira.handyan-2024@fisip.unair.ac.id[1]; deo.agung.sembada-2024@fisip.unair.ac.id[1]; mohamad.nur.khotib-2024@fisip.unair.ac.id[1]
*Corresponding author

ABSTRACT

Indonesia's digital media ecosystem has rapidly transformed, creating space for independent outlets to emerge with alternative content and business models. Yet, little research has examined how such media sustain themselves amid structural pressures of capital and regulation. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the business model of The Malaka Project, a media collective recognized for its critical, value-based content. The purpose is to explore how The Malaka Project balances editorial independence, financial sustainability, and regulatory adaptation. This study applied a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews involving four key organizational members, namely a producer, editor, social media strategist, and finance officer, complemented by a literature review on media economy and business models. Data were thematically analyzed to identify patterns in content production, monetization, audience relations, and regulatory challenges. Results show that The Malaka Project strategically targets progressive youth, positioning itself as an educational platform rooted in Tan Malaka's Madilog philosophy. Revenue derives from digital advertising, endorsements, crowdfunding, and community-based activities. Flexible and participatory working conditions foster creativity and collaboration but also expose the organization to precarity due to its reliance on platform algorithms and restrictive regulations, including Indonesia's Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE).

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INTRODUCTION

The development of alternative media cannot be separated from critiques of mainstream media, which are often considered to be closely tied to economic and political interests. In communication studies, alternative media is understood as a form of media practice that offers counter-perspectives to dominant structures through the production of critical and participatory content (Downing, 2012). In addition, alternative media is associated with efforts to expand democratic communication spaces by providing access to groups that have historically been underrepresented in mainstream media (Atton, 2012). Thus, alternative media functions not only as a channel of information, but also as a space for discourse production that enables the emergence of more diverse and inclusive narratives.

In contemporary developments, particularly in the digital era, alternative media has undergone significant transformations in both form and practice. The emergence of digital platforms has enabled wider content distribution with relatively low barriers (Gehl, 2015). However, alternative media remains embedded within a complex relationship with the broader media system, particularly in terms of its dependence on technological infrastructure and platform logic (Fuchs, 2010). This condition suggests that alternative media does not exist entirely outside media capitalism, but rather operates within an interconnected system shaped by broader economic and technological structures.

Alternative media plays an important role in shaping counterpublics that enable the emergence of narratives outside the mainstream. It functions as a means of articulating social, political, and cultural interests that are often not accommodated by dominant media (Atton, 2012). At the same time, alternative media encourages public participation in the production and distribution of discourse in digital spaces (Fuchs, 2010). Several studies in Indonesian communication scholarship also highlight that social media has increasingly developed into an alternative public space that enables communities and independent media actors to construct narratives beyond the dominant perspectives of mainstream media (Adiputra et al., 2023). Nevertheless, within an increasingly platformized digital ecosystem, alternative media faces challenges such as commercialization pressures and dependence on algorithm-driven distribution systems (Gehl, 2015). Therefore, alternative media not only reflects resistance to dominant structures, but also demonstrates an ongoing process of negotiation in maintaining independence and sustainability. In this context, it becomes important to examine how these practices are concretely realized within specific alternative media organizations, particularly in terms of how they articulate their vision, produce content, and reach audiences amid the pressures of the digital ecosystem. One example that represents these dynamics is The Malaka Project as an alternative media entity operating within Indonesia's digital landscape.

The Malaka Project was founded by nine figures from diverse backgrounds who share a grand vision of realizing Indonesia's golden generation by 2045. This vision is manifested through the presentation of critical content conveyed in language that is accessible to the public. Its founders, including Ferry Irwandi, Jerome Polin, Coki Pardede, Aurelia Vizal, Fatia Izzati, Angellie Nabila, Dea Anugrah, Cania Citta, and Rizky Ardiprakso (Fadilah et al., 2024), contribute to shaping the plural and diverse character of this media. The presence of The

Malaka Project can be found across various digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Spotify, enabling it to reach a wide audience across generations.

In terms of content, The Malaka Project fills the narrative space by addressing political, cultural, and social issues. Referring to Siswanto et al., (2021), digital content is considered to be of high quality not only when it provides entertainment, but also when it serves as a medium for information, moral values, and education. Within this framework, The Malaka Project stands as evidence that alternative media are capable of competing and even exerting significant influence amidst the dominance of capital-driven digital media. Its existence further demonstrates that the value of a media outlet is not solely determined by financial capital, but also by the quality of its content and the relevance of the issues it addresses.

From a theoretical perspective, this study draws on the Business Model Canvas framework (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010), which emphasizes the importance of understanding nine key elements of a business model, including customer segments, value proposition, and revenue streams. This framework is relevant for examining how The Malaka Project builds relationships with its audience and develops alternative monetization strategies. On the other hand, this study is also inseparable from the political economy of media approach (Mosco, 2009), which highlights how economic forces, regulations, and ownership structures can influence the sustainability of media. By combining these two perspectives, the study not only describes the business model in a descriptive manner but also examines the tension between the idealism of critical content and the structural realities of a digital media industry marked by commodification.

The researcher’s interest in The Malaka Project stems from its business approach and content strategy, which differ from those of commercial digital media in general. While many digital media rely heavily on traffic-driven content and advertising, The Malaka Project instead emphasizes value-based content oriented toward issues of diversity, social justice, and community dynamics. This strategy is complemented by a community-based monetization model, including audience crowdfunding, the sale of socially themed merchandise, and the organization of exhibitions, public discussions, and art performances. This demonstrates that the sustainability of media can be supported not only by substantial financial capital but also by the trust and active participation of audiences engaged in its ecosystem.

Nevertheless, critical attention must be directed toward the potential vulnerabilities of this model. First, community-based monetization patterns rely heavily on audience loyalty, which can be volatile. Second, the critical content offered by The Malaka Project has the potential to clash with national regulations, such as the UU ITE which may pose legal risks and encourage practices of self-censorship. This situation underscores the dilemma between maintaining content independence and adapting to strict regulatory frameworks. Thus, this study is not only significant in illustrating the business model of The Malaka Project but also in understanding how independent media develop sustainability strategies within a digital ecosystem fraught with regulatory challenges, the dominance of large capital, and the political dynamics of information. These challenges reflect broader structural issues that have been widely discussed in contemporary studies on digital media and platform-based ecosystems.

International studies show that the transformation of digital media is strongly influenced by platform dominance and the need for innovation to sustain viability. Young and Hermida (2024) argue that the relationship between media organizations and digital platforms creates new forms of power asymmetry, in which content distribution and monetization are largely determined by algorithmic systems. Meanwhile, Pérez-Seijo and Silva-Rodríguez (2024) demonstrate that digital native media rely on audience-centered approaches and community engagement as key strategies for achieving sustainability. These studies highlight the importance of adapting to the digital ecosystem, however, they tend to focus on the macro level and have not thoroughly examined internal practices and ideological dynamics within specific media organizations.

In the Indonesian context, several studies have examined the transformation of digital media business models and emerging monetization strategies. Widagdhaprasana & Dahana (2024) show that media organizations are shifting toward platform- and audience-based models, while Masduki et al. (2024) emphasize that digital journalism business models in Indonesia remain unstable and highly dependent on platforms. On the other hand, Kustiawan et al. (2024) identify various monetization strategies, such as digital advertising, subscriptions, and crowdfunding, as efforts to sustain media operations. Nevertheless, most of these studies focus on mainstream media and tend to approach business models from a technical and descriptive perspective, without deeply examining ideological aspects or regulatory pressures faced by alternative media.

Based on these studies, there is a research gap regarding how alternative media in Indonesia empirically manage their business models under complex pressures. Previous research has not comprehensively integrated business model analysis with a political economy of media approach, particularly in the context of alternative media that are not solely profit-oriented but also driven by specific ideological commitments. In addition, issues such as the tension between editorial independence and economic necessity, practices of self-censorship due to digital regulation, and platform dependency have not been sufficiently explored within a unified analytical framework. Therefore, this study offers novelty by examining The Malaka Project as an alternative media organization through the integration of business model and political economy perspectives, in order to understand how independent media negotiate economic sustainability, ideological values, and regulatory pressures within the contemporary digital ecosystem.

This study focuses on analyzing the business model implemented by The Malaka Project, particularly in the dimensions of customer segments, value proposition, and revenue streams. In addition, the study also examines working conditions as well as regulatory challenges that affect the sustainability of this media outlet. In recent years, the digital media ecosystem in Indonesia has undergone significant changes, marked by the proliferation of independent media. These media outlets not only provide alternative content but also offer new business models that differ from mainstream media. In this context, The Malaka Project stands out as one of the most notable examples, attracting the attention of both the public and academics.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is grounded in two main conceptual frameworks: media economics and media business models. From the perspective of media economics, the media industry is understood not merely as a provider of entertainment and information, but as an economic entity operating under a capitalist system. Media sell both content and audiences to advertisers, even turning audience data into a new commodity (Haryanto, 2017). McChesney, as cited in Haryanto (2017), emphasizes that under capitalism, media tend to support conglomerate interests by prioritizing economic profit over content quality, thereby narrowing the space for critical and minority narratives. This is reinforced by Herman and Chomsky's propaganda theory (Apul, 2022), which argues that mass media often filter information in accordance with the interests of capital owners. However, Hesmondhalgh (2016) reminds us that there is still room for innovation and resistance, particularly through independent media capable of advancing social values, ethics, and community empowerment. Thus, media economics presents a dual dynamic: as a space of capitalist domination while also offering opportunities for resistance through alternative media.

The new media business model framework highlights how media organizations create, deliver, and capture value within the digital ecosystem. Picard (2011) as well as Chesbrough and Rosenbloom (2002) stress that a business model is not merely a financial strategy, but also encompasses organizational architecture, value creation logic, and audience relations. Significant change has emerged with the rise of digital media (Widagdhaprasana & Dahana, 2024), which encourages participatory and collaborative interaction with audiences. Osterwalder & Pigneur's (2010) Business Model Canvas serves as an essential tool to map out nine elements of a business model: customer segments, value propositions, distribution channels, customer relationships, revenue streams, key resources, key activities, partnerships, and cost structure. However, a major challenge arises from dependency on global platforms that control distribution, monetization, and content algorithms. This condition renders new media highly vulnerable, as their business logic is heavily shaped by platform policies.

First, in-depth interviews were conducted with four key informants from The Malaka Project, each representing strategic roles within the organization, including social media strategy, financial management, content production, and production coordination. The informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, based on their direct involvement in core organizational activities such as content creation, distribution strategies, audience engagement, and financial sustainability.

The interviews were conducted on June 19 and June 30, 2025 through via online meetings using Zoom, depending on the availability of the informants. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a semi-structured format, allowing flexibility to explore emerging themes while maintaining consistency with the research objectives. The characteristics of the informants involved in this study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 List of Informants

Informant Code	Initials	Position	Interview Date
Informant 1	SB	Social Media Strategist	19 June 2025
Informant 2	Na	Finance	19 June 2025
Informant 3	AR	Videographer/Editor	30 June 2025
Informant 4	DJ	Producer	30 June 2025

All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved coding the interview transcripts, identifying recurring patterns, and categorizing them into key themes related to business models, platform dependency, and sustainability strategies. This approach enabled the researcher to systematically interpret the perspectives of different organizational roles within The Malaka Project in navigating the digital media ecosystem.

Second, the literature review was conducted by examining various references, such as books, scientific journals, research reports, and other academic sources relevant to the topics of media economics and new media business models. This literature review served as the conceptual foundation and analytical framework for interpreting the research data and comparing the The Malaka Project's business practices with the findings of previous studies.

The data analysis technique employed in this study is thematic analysis. The process began with data reduction, which involved filtering the results of interviews and literature to select information relevant to the research focus, namely the media economics practices and business model of The Malaka Project. The next stage was categorization and coding, conducted by organizing categories based on major themes such as content production strategies, distribution patterns on social media, audience relations, revenue sources, and challenges stemming from dependency on digital platforms. Following this, the data were presented in the form of descriptive narratives that connected the empirical findings with theories of media economics and new media business models. The final stage was drawing conclusions, which involved developing interpretations to answer the research question of how The Malaka Project builds its business model within the digital media landscape while simultaneously negotiating with the logic of capitalist economics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Malaka Project Business Model

This section examines the The Malaka Project's business model, derived from business model identification and strengthened by internal data collection. The researcher conducted interviews with several parties directly involved in the The Malaka Project, including the producer, finance division, social media strategist, and editor. These interviews provided a comprehensive overview of the internal workflow and communication strategies implemented by the The Malaka Project. As explained earlier, a business model consists of several elements. Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010) mention that there are at least nine elements to examine a business model, commonly known as the Business Model Canvas (BMC). In this discussion, the researcher focuses on customer segments, value proposition, and revenue streams.

Customer Segments

In general, customer segments can be understood as groups of customers or audiences who share similar desires or needs (Kotler & Keller, 2006). With regard to audience segmentation, the interview findings indicate that the direction of communication and the ideas consistently developed by the The Malaka Project have been aimed at young audiences. The younger generation is positioned as a group with social awareness, a spirit of critical thinking, and concern for the nation's future.

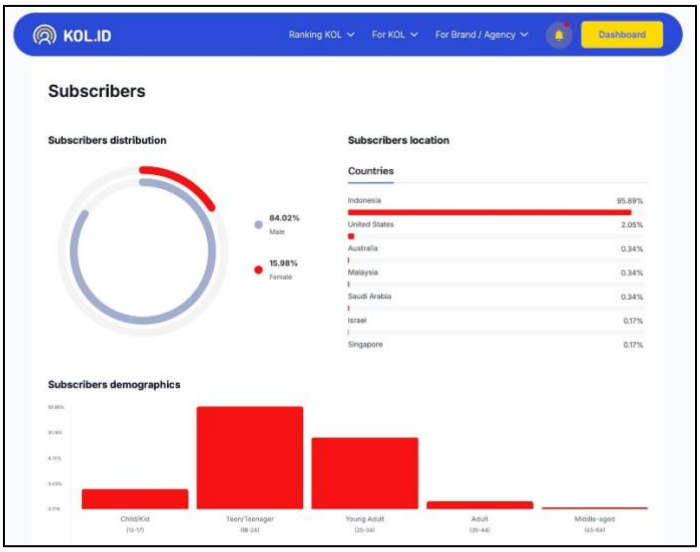
> "Yes, we are targeting the generation that will reach its peak around 2045. Those who are teenagers today, roughly aged 18 to perhaps 27 years old." (Informant 1, personal interview, June 19, 2025)
>
> "Of course, we are always trying to stay relevant, to see what these teenagers are talking about." (Informant 3, personal interview, June 30, 2025)

The statements above demonstrate that the The Malaka Project strategically positions young people as the primary subject in its communication approach. The focus is directed toward teenagers and young adults who are projected to be in their productive age by 2045. This segmentation reflects the The Malaka Project's intention to build a shared narrative about the future together with the generation that is currently shaping its identity, values, and perspectives on social issues. The effort to remain relevant also shows that the The Malaka Project seeks to align its ideas with conversations and interests within youth communities. The Malaka Project not only conveys messages but also engages in the dialogic space of young people. This is in line with the view that progressive youth hold great potential as agents of change—individuals actively involved in collective movements that drive social transformation and sustainable change (Fajar et al., 2024).

"Actually, we try to use a variety of languages. For example, when we want to discuss the economy in this country or other complex matters, we try to use a language that can truly be understood by Malaka's audience. For instance, there was one piece of content in Malaka by Ferry Irwandi, where he created content using baby talk." (Informant 4, personal interview, June 30, 2025)

> "For me, Malaka's real target market is actually young people who don't have the opportunity to go to college." (Informant 3, personal interview, June 30, 2025)

From the interview excerpts above, it is evident that The Malaka Project consciously adopts a communication approach that adapts to the characteristics of its niche market, critical young people who require information delivered in an easily understandable way. A business model with a niche market segmentation targets specific and narrowly defined audience groups, which are often relatively small in number and underserved (Setiawan, 2023). The effort to ground complex discussions in simple language, including the use of baby talk to explain complicated topics, reflects a differentiation strategy in reaching this specific audience. Thus, The Malaka Project positions itself as an alternative media platform that resonates with contemporary youth culture while still maintaining the substance of complex issues being discussed.



Source: Kol.id, 2025

Figure 1 Subscription Demographic of The Malaka Project

By placing young audiences at the center of its segmentation strategy, The Malaka Project is shaping an audience base that is not merely composed of passive consumers, but also individuals who actively engage with social and structural issues discussed in its content. Subscription demographic data in Figure 1, indicate that the majority of its audience is between 18–24 years old, an age range commonly associated with the phase of emerging adulthood, characterized by identity exploration, critical reflection, and increasing social awareness (Arnett, 2000). This audience profile is reflected in The Malaka Project's emphasis on discussions surrounding public policy, democracy, education, and Indonesia's 2045 vision, which appeal to digitally literate young audiences seeking alternatives to mainstream media narratives. By placing progressive youth at the center of its segmentation, The Malaka Project is shaping an audience base that is not merely passive consumers but part of a participatory value ecosystem with the potential to contribute to the platform's sustainability. This aligns with Osterwalder and Pigneur's (2010) perspective in Business Model Generation, which emphasizes that strong value creation must be grounded in a deep understanding of customer segments and the problems they face. This approach also reflects the broader shift in media business models, from being mere content providers to becoming facilitators of dialogue spaces and social interaction, as highlighted by Picard (2011) in his work The Economics and Financing of Media Companies.

In the contemporary media landscape, the position of The Malaka Project as an alternative media outlet becomes significant given the growing dominance of mainstream media, which often falls into the logic of commercial and political interests. Alternative media emerges as a counter-space that offers different perspectives, particularly on social and political issues that are rarely explored in depth by large media corporations. By placing young people as its core audience, The Malaka Project not only builds emotional closeness but also strengthens the collective identity of a critical generation. However, such relevance also depends on the ability of alternative media to maintain consistent content quality amidst the overwhelming flow of digital information.

Another challenge faced by The Malaka Project is the sustainability of its business model within an increasingly competitive digital ecosystem. Alternative media tends to face financial resource limitations, especially due to its narrow market segmentation and the preferences of young audiences who do not always contribute in the form of direct financial support. On the other hand, its dependence on digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube also creates vulnerability to algorithmic shifts that may reduce content reach. This situation demands that The Malaka Project continuously innovate in building audience engagement without sacrificing substantive depth. Thus, while The Malaka Project has successfully positioned itself as a relevant alternative media for progressive youth, its long-term sustainability heavily depends on its ability to balance the need to remain popular, critical, and economically independent.

Value Proposition

> "We at Malaka want Malaka to become one of the driving forces for Indonesian society to achieve the success of 2045. Malaka wants to try to become one of the foundations for achieving Indonesia Emas 2045." (Informant 1, personal interview, June 19, 2025)
>
> "So people who have not had the opportunity to go to college can at least experience what it feels like to have some way of thinking or knowledge that is usually taught in universities. Even knowledge that is sometimes not found in universities." (Informant 3, personal interview, June 30, 2025)

Value proposition is a method that can build value from a product offered to consumers (Rifai & Witriantino, 2022). Based on the statements above, it can be seen that the main value of The Malaka Project is not merely the dissemination of information, but rather serving as an educational space for fostering critical awareness and systematic thinking. The Malaka Project offers Tan Malaka's ideas as an approach to unravel various contemporary informational problems that are considered "too chaotic."

> "That (MADILOG-Materialism, Dialectics, Logic) is actually our long-term goal. Along the way, we just want young people to think critically, to not easily believe in mystical logic, and we want young people to be more knowledgeable, not too easily linking things to mystical matters." (Informant 3, personal interview, June 30, 2025)

> “Okay, actually if we simplify the impression of Madilog, we can explain that we are pro science in our way of thinking. For everything that is pro science we strongly believe it must be highlighted, widely disseminated. We say no to hoaxes, we provide good comparisons for media alternatives, and we aim to be a more balanced channel.” (Informant 4, personal interview, June 30, 2025)

Based on the interview excerpts above, The Malaka Project has an ideological commitment to promoting rational and logical ways of thinking, particularly among young people. The concept of MADILOG (Materialism, Dialectics, and Logic) serves as a foundation of thought through pro science content and rejects mystical logic as a way of reasoning. Alternative media has played an important role in constructing narrative spaces that dismantle mainstream discourses, especially in presenting knowledge-based content (Rospitasari, 2021). The “pro science” and “anti hoax” approaches strengthen The Malaka Project’s position as a channel that is not merely informative but also a space that fosters healthy debate and the formation of data-driven opinion. Hermondhalgh (2016) explains that independent media still has space for resistance against the hegemony of the capitalist industry, particularly when such media actively develops critical thinking and narratives. Thus, The Malaka Project emerges as a stimulus for society to become more intellectually aware and not easily swayed by public opinion.

The value offered by The Malaka Project does not only lie in its informative content but also in its epistemic positioning, namely how the media situates itself as a producer of knowledge with an ideological affiliation to rationality and scientific thinking. By using the concept of MADILOG (Materialism, Dialectics, Logic) as the foundation of its narrative, The Malaka Project engages in what is referred to as epistemological resistance, which is resistance against a culture of information that is blurred, shallow, and full of distortion in the post-truth era. Epistemological resistance itself can be understood as the use of epistemic resources and abilities to weaken and change oppressive normative structures (Reinert, 2020). In this context, the “pro science” approach is not merely a branding strategy but a serious effort to restore the public’s capacity for reasoning through the presentation of arguments based on data and logic. This is particularly important given that the dominance of social media algorithms often amplifies content that is emotional, simplistic, and clickbait.

However, this ideological position also opens space for criticism. Although The Malaka Project promotes rationality and aligns itself with “common sense,” there is a potential for epistemic exclusivity that makes it difficult for groups with low literacy to actively engage. A study conducted by Lewis (2012) shows the existence of a tension between professional control and open participation. When media place too much emphasis on intellectual credentials and the logic of professionalism as a basis of legitimacy, access to critical narratives becomes available only to groups with certain cultural capital, while the public with limited literacy or intellectual authority is excluded from the sphere of knowledge production. This aligns with what is referred to as boundary work in media professions, namely the effort to maintain authority and control over content. Yet this tension becomes problematic because it sacrifices inclusivity and the potential for open participation, which are in fact core values of the digital ecosystem. In the context of The Malaka Project, although its communication language seeks to be grounded and accessible, the use of intellectual references such as Tan Malaka or MADILOG still requires a certain level of literacy that is not necessarily possessed by all segments of young audiences, particularly those structurally marginalized from access to higher education.

Revenue Streams

> "Okay, so the sources of income come from Google Ads and endorsements. Usually, it varies. For example, yesterday we had a product endorsement." (Informant 2, personal interview, June 19, 2025)

The revenue streams of The Malaka Project rely on an advertising-based and endorsement-based business model, which is commonly used by digital media today. This model allows The Malaka Project to generate income from traffic monetization and collaborations with brands. Endorsements serve as a relevant diversification strategy because they provide opportunities for collaboration without altering the editorial direction. On the one hand, Bekh (2020) explains that an advertising-based revenue model depends on the media's capacity to consistently capture audience attention, making audience attention and impressions the main commodity. Thus, this approach, especially digital advertising, is vulnerable to fluctuations due to algorithmic dependence. In addition, AdSense also has the potential to compromise content and editorial direction as it often aligns with audience satisfaction.

> "Because the income really comes from AdSense and similar sources, one of our targets is indeed to increase AdSense earnings each month. In my opinion, the impact is not that significant to the point of changing the ideology or direction behind the content. Because, to be honest, Kak Cania and Kak Ferry (the founders of The Malaka Project) are quite idealistic. When they feel there is an issue that really needs to be discussed, even though the tendency is that the AdSense revenue might not be very high, it still has to be discussed, and the content has to be made." (Informant 2, personal interview, June 19, 2025)

In the case of The Malaka Project, the founders' determination to continue raising critical topics despite the risk of financial disadvantage reflects an effort to balance business sustainability with editorial independence. This step demonstrates a stance that prioritizes the values of the organization over mere commercial profit, which is crucial for maintaining readers' trust and loyalty in the long term. Susanto (2021) explains that media independence in determining the direction of reporting without external intervention is a key factor in building credibility and public trust. In this regard, The Malaka Project does indeed rely on AdSense and digital advertising for revenue. However, ideologically, these elements cannot dismantle the values established by the organization merely for financial gain.

The revenue model of The Malaka Project represents the structural dilemma faced by many independent digital media outlets, namely the tension between economic survival and the ideological commitment to remain critical and independent. By depending on Google AdSense and endorsements, The Malaka Project is situated within a platform-dependent media landscape, where quantitative metrics such as views, clicks, and engagement become the primary determinants of revenue flow. This pattern reflects the logic of the attention economy, which positions audience attention as the main commodity (Hödl & Myrach, 2023). While this strategy enables sustainable monetization, dependence on platform algorithms remains risky because critical content often lacks competitiveness compared to popular or entertainment-oriented content. This situation illustrates a new form of platform enclosure, in which distribution and revenue are determined by opaque algorithmic mechanisms (Suherman, 2025).

On the other hand, the editorial idealism of The Malaka Project, which continues to address critical issues despite being less favorable in terms of digital performance, demonstrates a form of resistance against pure market logic. However, this advertising- and endorsement-based model has the potential to create financial precarity, namely an unstable condition resulting from excessive dependence on global platforms without significant bargaining power (Hödl & Myrach, 2023). Therefore, although such idealism deserves appreciation, long-term sustainability strategies still require diversification of revenue models, for example through membership, crowdfunding, or independent publishing. These efforts are crucial so that alternative media such as The Malaka Project can not only survive economically, but also maintain the consistency of its ideological values as well as its public credibility.

Workflow and Collective Work Model

> “Well, usually we have a routine meeting on Mondays. That is where we brainstorm all the requirements to discuss our plan for the upcoming week and what we are going to do... On Monday we gather together to exchange ideas about what we want to do. On Friday we usually hold a weekly report with all departments again.” (Informant 1, personal interview, June 19, 2025)

The working condition at The Malaka Project reflects the creation of a flexible yet structured work environment. The Malaka Project is an independent media platform that prioritizes collaboration and efficiency, which is manifested in its working condition. One example of its work practices is holding meetings every Monday and Friday. These meetings serve as discussion spaces for the entire team, to plan content at the beginning of the week and to conduct evaluations at the end of the week. In these meetings, the team develops strategies and considers what kind of content will be produced. The strategy development and evaluation process can be seen as an effort to create content that captures audience attention. This aligns with Smythe’s explanation of the revenue logic of media, which views the audience as a commodity that can be sold to advertisers (Fuchs, 2012).

"In Malaka itself, there is a KPI but the good thing is that we don't rigidly stick to it. So if our KPI doesn't reach the target, that's okay, we'll try again next week. Of course, we figure out why we didn't reach our KPI and so on. We also discuss that during evaluations." (Informant 4, personal interview, June 30, 2025)

"Actually, in Malaka it's not too corporate. Because we are a media center and the production team is heavy on talent. So it's very much semi-formal. I mean, there's no need for formal letters. Usually when dealing with other divisions, you would need letters or documents. But here, you can just use WhatsApp or check emails." (Informant 2, personal interview, June 19, 2025)

In its work practices, The Malaka Project applies the Key Performance Indicator (KPI) as a reference for work achievement. However, the KPI implemented by The Malaka Project is not binding or coercive, as it is adjusted according to the team's condition. It can be concluded that there is space for negotiation while simultaneously encouraging sustainable productivity without burdening the workers. This is also supported by the form of communication within The Malaka Project, which is informal in nature. The absence of rigid hierarchy in the company allows team relationships to run without awkwardness. Coordination among teams can be carried out directly and quickly, so that when a need arises, teams can coordinate immediately. In this case, the working condition at The Malaka Project also reflects participatory management. Participatory management is a form of management approach that involves members of the organization in the decision-making process and program development. Participatory management rejects authoritarian values, and instead prioritizes an open vision, creativity, informality, plurality, and so on (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005).

The flexible and participatory work structure applied by The Malaka Project can be understood as part of the adaptation to the highly dynamic landscape of working conditions. The concepts of flexibility and participation are the two key terms that describe the working conditions of The Malaka Project workers. Interview findings indicate that work responsibilities are distributed according to production needs and situational conditions. Informant 4 explained that production activities, ranging from the production process to post-production, are coordinated through specific responsibilities assigned within the team. Informant 1 described that technical work processes, such as determining production equipment and filming needs, are adjusted collaboratively by considering the availability and current conditions of each worker. These findings suggest that flexibility within The Malaka Project is not entirely unstructured, but is accompanied by coordination mechanisms and shared responsibilities in the production process.

The digital era work model is closely tied to the collapse of boundaries that have long been maintained by conventional work models. Deuze and Witschge (2018) explain that media work in the digital era increasingly leans toward a model that is flexible, target-oriented, adaptive, and characterized by a blurred boundary between work and everyday life. The work model in The Malaka Project, which no longer relies on hierarchical structures, reflects the flexible situations that occur widely today. On the other hand, The Malaka Project's work model still promotes participatory professionalism in building working conditions. Workers still face demands in the form of KPI and are encouraged to exercise creativity, which is tested in every meeting to build weekly planning. Orlandi et al. (2024) explain that digital workers continue to face demands to innovate and adapt to new algorithms and technologies. Thus, the two components, namely flexibility and participatory professionalism, are a combined work model to address the dynamic challenges of The Malaka Project's working condition.

The work structure implemented by The Malaka Project illustrates in an interesting way how an independent media organization can manage collective and adaptive work in the midst of the rapidly changing digital environment. The practice of holding regular meetings at the beginning and end of the week underscores the importance of spaces for reflection and continuous planning as the foundation for the continuity of content production. This aligns with the concept of agile communication planning put forward by van Ruler (2021), where strategic planning is not rigid, but is continuously adapted through repeated evaluation to effectively respond to change. This approach also reflects the application of agile practice values. Agile practice, in the form of team autonomy and agile communication, contributes to psychological empowerment, which in turn encourages innovative behavior of agile teams, a factor considered crucial by Malik et al. (2021) in their research on agile practice and performance. They emphasize that work strategies must allow for rapid iterations and adaptation to new contexts in order to remain relevant and productive.

Nevertheless, the semi-formal and non-hierarchical approach also requires caution. The absence of strong formal structures indeed provides space for freedom and spontaneity, but on the other hand, it can create invisible inequalities, especially if internal dynamics are not accompanied by mechanisms of transparency and equitable distribution of responsibility. In this context, as reminded by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010), work relations that appear collegial are not necessarily free from tension, particularly when workloads are not distributed proportionally or when decision-making remains centralized in dominant key figures.

Regulatory Challenges of The Malaka Project

In today's digital era, alternative media such as The Malaka Project are not exempt from the complex challenges of running their business. In addition to competing within a highly dynamic media ecosystem, The Malaka Project must also respond to regulatory challenges in Indonesia as well as its dependence on global platforms. Digital media regulation cannot solely focus on market competition but must also pursue other fundamental values (Brogi & Parcu, 2014), as it has the potential to open pathways for democratic participation in the public sphere for marginalized groups while simultaneously acting as a catalyst for social inequality (Fiedler & Morrison, 2025). Regulations in Indonesia, such as the Electronic Information and Transactions Law, have the potential to affect freedom of expression as well as the stability and sustainability of the business being run. The Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE) in Indonesia functions to regulate the governance of digital communication, including aspects of information, transactions, and content distribution in the digital sphere. However, in practice, the UU ITE is known for numerous issues of power abuse that restrict freedom. This has made the UU ITE controversial, as several of its articles have been misused to suppress freedom of expression and speech in digital media (Rahmadani et al., 2024).

> "From Malaka's team itself, practicing self-censorship to avoid potential risks of being affected by Indonesian rules or regulations actually starts even before we begin shooting. For example, from the scriptwriting stage, we are already trained — not trained, but it has become common practice for writers to assess whether something might be dangerous or not, or whether certain words are too offensive. These are filtered again to see if they might pose risks or not, because Bang Dea (one of the founders) has experience in journalism, he was a reporter. After that, once the video is done, we review it again, checking the censorship and whether any words could be dangerous for Malaka." (Informant 4, personal interview, June 30, 2025)

Alternative media like The Malaka Project rely heavily on the stability of content production and distribution. The threats and challenges posed by the ITE Law, which create the potential for criminalization based on subjective legal interpretations, push media outlets to engage in self-censorship. This phenomenon raises concerns about the decline in the quality of critical substance that The Malaka Project seeks to cultivate, as it must adjust to regulations in order to avoid legal risks. The self-censorship process at Malaka begins at the initial scriptwriting stage, filtering words or topics that could trigger legal issues, particularly those that are sensitive or potentially offensive. After production, the content also goes through additional editing stages, with input from one of its founders who has journalistic expertise, in order to ensure that the final output complies with prevailing regulations.

> "We don't have any regulations related to law or anything like that in this alternative media. The only limitation we face is from the applications themselves. Several times on TikTok, for example, we've experienced shadow banning. I honestly don't understand why; it's confusing. Even our team still doesn't know, we don't understand why some videos got banned. Then on our YouTube channel, it happens quite often that we get hit with the yellow dollar sign. And again, we don't understand why—because as far as we know, there's nothing controversial or in violation of YouTube's own rules or its community guidelines." (Informant 1, in-depth interview, June 19, 2025)

The Malaka Project, which developed YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok channels as its primary information distribution mediums, is not immune from the shadow of platform regulations. Algorithmic logic and internal platform policies play a significant role in content distribution, including potential harms such as shadow banning, demonetization, or classification as sensitive content. This condition reflects broader dynamics within platform-based media ecosystems, where algorithmic systems increasingly determine the visibility and economic viability of digital content.

Algorithmic logic and internal platform policies shape content distribution by determining visibility, reach, and monetization potential. These systems operate through opaque criteria that prioritize engagement metrics such as views, clicks, and watch time, often privileging content aligned with platform-defined standards of visibility and profitability (Gillespie, 2018). As a result, content perceived as controversial or less commercially viable may be deprioritized or subjected to reduced visibility, a phenomenon often described as shadow banning.

In addition, monetization policies reinforce these dynamics by attaching economic consequences to algorithmic classification. Content flagged as unsuitable for advertisers may be demonetized, limiting revenue opportunities even when it does not explicitly violate platform rules (Napoli, 2019). Moreover, platform governance is often characterized by a lack of transparency and consistency, making it difficult for content creators to anticipate or challenge moderation decisions (van Dijck *et al.*, 2018). The constitutive logic of platforms increasingly clashes with the principles of good governance, regulatory clarity, and consistent enforcement, leaving content creators trapped in dependency and frustration as they lose control over the future of their digital media (Savolainen, 2022). Consequently, these mechanisms create structural dependency, where media actors must continuously adapt to evolving platform rules while losing control over the distribution and sustainability of their content.

This phenomenon creates a space of uncertainty regarding revenue and content distribution. YouTube’s opaque algorithm can, at any moment, categorize The Malaka Project’s critical educational content as sensitive. As a result, such content becomes ineligible for promotion and monetization. This condition inevitably hampers the business model and growth of alternative media like The Malaka Project.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research objectives, this study finds that The Malaka Project implements an alternative media business model that integrates a clearly defined audience segmentation, a critical value proposition, and adaptive sustainability strategies within the digital media ecosystem. The findings indicate that its business model is not solely oriented toward information dissemination, but is structured to cultivate critical awareness through targeted audience engagement and value-driven content production. At the same time, this model is supported by flexible and participatory working conditions that enable collaborative production processes while maintaining organizational professionalism. However, the sustainability of this model is continuously negotiated within broader structural constraints, particularly regulatory pressures and platform dependency, which shape both content practices and economic strategies.

Its audience segmentation is highly specific, targeting young generations who are not only media literate, but also socially sensitive and interested in understanding the nation’s structural issues, as reflected in the discourse surrounding Indonesia's 2045 vision. This target audience demands a space that encourages systematic and reflective thinking, beyond the dominant narratives presented by mainstream media.

To meet this need, the The Malaka Project offers added value in the form of critical thinking grounded in the MADILOG (Materialism, Dialectics, and Logic) framework, adapted from the ideas of Tan Malaka. This approach allows the audience not only to consume information, but also to construct a rational map of social reality amid the increasingly uncontrollable disruptions of digital information. In terms of working conditions, the The Malaka Project demonstrates adaptability to the dynamic landscape of digital labor by emphasizing flexibility and participation. Its work structure no longer relies on rigid hierarchies, but instead encourages collaboration and fluid distribution of responsibilities. At the same time, workers are required to remain professional through the establishment of KPIs and weekly meetings that stimulate creativity and work planning. The combination of flexibility and participatory professionalism serves as a strategy to face the challenges of the ever-changing world of work.

The Malaka Project faces structural challenges within Indonesia's digital media ecosystem. National regulations such as the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE) potentially undermine the quality of critical substance that The Malaka Project seeks to build, as media outlets tend to engage in self-censorship to avoid legal threats. Malaka applies self-censorship as early as the scriptwriting stage by filtering words or issues that may pose regulatory risks, particularly those deemed offensive or sensitive. The editing process is also layered, including post-production evaluations, drawing on the journalistic experience of one of its founders to ensure that content remains legally safe. In addition, dependence on global platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok creates uncertainties, both in terms of content distribution and revenue stability. This situation ultimately drives The Malaka Project to continuously adjust its business model through diversifying funding sources and strengthening a loyal community as the foundation of its sustainability. However, these strategies do not necessarily guarantee long-term stability. Dependence on audience loyalty and community-based support reflects both an adaptive strategy and the structural fragility faced by alternative media within today's platformized digital ecosystem. The uncertainty of platform algorithms, shifting audience engagement, and unstable monetization systems indicate that sustainability for alternative media remains highly vulnerable to external technological and economic forces beyond their control. Thus, the experience of The Malaka Project illustrates not only the resilience of alternative media actors, but also the persistent precarity underlying independent digital media operations.

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