

Digital Transformation of Islamic Media (Descriptive Analysis of Republika Transition to Full-Digital in 2023)

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

Republika
Digital Transformation
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Digitalization of media in Indonesia is now a trend, both locally and nationally. Like Republika, which has undergone a digital transformation by fully switching to a digital platform at the beginning of 2023, as a response to the development of information technology. This research aims to explain the reasons, commitment, and prospects of Republika after the print version ended. This study uses descriptive analysis with sources from policy makers in Republika, who have expressed their opinions through the Republika newspaper a week before the print version ended. The findings in this study are the readiness of Republika to fully transform to a digital platform. The added value obtained by Republika is unlimited space and a wider reach. Meanwhile, Republika assurance is to maintain the quality of content, maintain good journalism traditions, and maintain Republic's inclusive Islamic ideology in Indonesia.

1. Introduction

As a country with a majority of Muslims, Indonesia does not have many media with an Islamic character that have a national scale reach and management, let alone published every day. When Republika arrived in early 1993, it seemed to be a hope that became a support for the people for the presence of balanced information about Islam. Before that, Muslims in Indonesia were very longing for the presence of a newspaper with an Islamic nuance (Utomo, 2010, p. 11)

Republika, initiated by the Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals Association (ICMI) and other Islamic figures, brings a very strong Muslim intellectual character. Even in its first edition, the "Editorial" of Republika explains that the presence of Republika among the Indonesian people is aimed at filling the knowledge deficit that is still considered lacking, especially among urban Muslims who are growing.

To reinforce its Islamic aspect, Republika continues to strive to realize an inclusive, compassionate Islam, but adapts to the very strong Indonesian condition, a diverse nation in race, nation, culture and religion. Even in the context of knowledge, Republika was designed by its founders as a force for renewal. Its main goal is to make Indonesia more fair, more prosperous, and more prosperous with God's approval, presented for the entire Indonesian nation.

When it was published and greeted the public at the end of the Orde Baru regime, Republika tried to enter the middle of the media landscape in Indonesia by capturing public attention. In addition to launching a print newspaper with a rather quirky appearance, Republika, in its second year, already launched its digital platform, republika.co.id, in the midst of the neglect of other-media's attention to this new world.

In the first decade of its existence, Republika has shown its character, not only emphasizing its inclusive Islamic character, but also innovations that are sometimes anti-mainstream. The front page

of Republika is an unusual display, with a very unique layout, a block system and is not continuous. Then in terms of design, page one becomes a very quirky and attractive cover, often receiving praise and awards both nationally and in Asia.

In the field of digitalization, besides continuously developing its online version, Republika also created a premium version with a subscription system, i.e., *republika.co*. The presence of this subscription system, Republika wants to continue educating the public about the pattern of consuming information that is not solely obtained for free, while also valuing high-quality journalism works. To maintain closeness and accommodate content from the public, Republika created *retizen*. Even when emphasizing its Islamic identity, Republika not only created sections and sub-domains on religious issues but also launched a dedicated portal for Hajj and Umrah.

In December 2022, rumors emerged that Republika will take a bold step, in the form of the closure of its print version. The information was confirmed when Republika Director Aris Hilman wrote an open letter known as "The Right Path of Republika". The letter emphasized the end of the print newspaper and Republika continuing to a new chapter with a full digital format.

Republika also innovated as it approached the end of its print edition. Other newspapers or magazines would usually announce their end in their last edition, with an official announcement. But Republika educated and provided justifications for its bold step in several of its last editions. At least two weeks before, Republika wrote educational quotes about digitization on the top of the front page that was designed in a striking manner.

In the last week, the front page of Republika contained no news at all, but instead featured articles from the top editors, director, and owner of Republika, which contained education about the digital transformation. The cover page was designed in an unusual black-and-white manner. So, as the highly revolutionary transition approached, Republika took the time to educate its readers, so that the public gradually understood its policies. Finally, on January 1st, 2023, the print edition of Republika no longer published and everything switched to the digital version.

The transformation of Republika to a full digital platform becomes a choice amidst the challenges faced by print-based media. It is important to understand how this media, which has a position in the Islamic community, initiates a new chapter in its journey in the 100% digital sector. How does Republika maintain its highly ideological and inclusive Islamic character in the midst of the digital space's demand for speed? It is also important to understand Republika's optimism after taking the right path.

2. Method

This research uses qualitative method with qualitative descriptive approach. Descriptive research is intended to formulate the problem and guide the research to explore or paint a comprehensive, broad, and in-depth picture of the social situation to be studied. Bogdan and Taylor, as quoted by Moleong, explain that qualitative approach is a research procedure that results in descriptive data in the form of written or oral words and behaviors observed from people (Moleong, 2021). Meanwhile, qualitative research focuses on social phenomena, giving voice to the feelings and perceptions of participants under study.

This is based on the belief that knowledge is produced from social settings and that understanding social knowledge is a legitimate scientific process (Emzir & Pd, 2014). In this research, qualitative descriptive aims to obtain complete information about the digital transformation of Republika as an Islamic media by discontinuing its print version.

This study's subjects are the top leaders in Republika, consisting of senior editors, Deputy Chief Editor, Director, and even its owner. They are the people who have been in control of Republika, ranging from funding aspects, operational policies, to content policies. Even in this digital transformation process, they are the people behind these policies. The individuals who made statements in written form and were published in Republika are Erick Thohir as the owner, Aris Hilman as the Director of PT Republika Media Mandiri, Nur Hasan Murtiaji as the Deputy Chief Editor of Republika, Subroto as the Executive Editor of Republika, Firkah Fansuri as the Deputy Executive Director of Republika, and Elba Damhuri as the Executive Editor of *republika.co.id*.

The data source used in this study was the subjective opinions expressed by the subjects, which were reflected on the cover page of *Republika* for one week (December 26-31, 2022). These writings were considered official statements as they were written with the intention of expressing their opinions regarding the reasons behind *Republika*'s digital transformation policy of discontinuing its print version. At least, there are several important points expressed by the subjects, such as the character of *Republika*'s innovation, the shift to digital format, post-transformation optimism, as well as the assurance of quality content and the preservation of ideology.

3. Literature Review

In the last two decades, the media business in the country has not been doing well. Disruptions have impacted the change in behavior of society, forcing them to adapt to technology. Mass media, as a social institution in the field of information, has experienced similar impacts because its existence is greatly influenced by technology. Two factors that finally influence mass media and force it to adapt are the rapid development of technology, which leads to the digitization of media, and the change in media consumer behavior, which is the general public.

Digital technology has had a serious impact on various things, including the media industry both nationally and globally. In such a situation, where technology continues to evolve, there is no option to retreat, but rather integrating with this advancement is more realistic (Sudibyo, 2023, p. 3). The media industry has chosen to converge in various fields in order to remain growing and adapting to a changing situation.

The digitalization of media creates a new media characterized by convergence, encompassing all types of traditional media: print, audio-visual to digital platforms (Alfian, 2022, p. 153). This new digital media is fundamentally different from traditional media. The new media is primarily characterized by the development of digital technology that converges all types of media and is based on the internet. Thus, digitalization blurs the boundaries of media. As a result, the media that is most impacted by this digitalization in the context of mass communication is traditional or old media.

Therefore, according to Sudibyo, media managers today find it increasingly difficult to avoid integration into the ecosystem of content distribution, user data, and advertising controlled by global digital platforms. In practice, the intersection between journalism and technology will be met in the work of content distribution, data mining, and advertising services operated by digital platforms (Sudibyo, 2023, p. 171).

Creating a media climate in the midst of digital technology development must be balanced with a healthy and transparent media climate. Therefore, it is important to avoid highly centralized-monopolistic media industry structures. Because fundamentally, digitalization greatly enables the media industry to monopolize by expanding its reach of power on various platforms. So what is called media convergence, in all honesty, benefits large-capital media industries (Tapsell, 2018, p. 77).

Meanwhile, in the context of democracy, media according to John Keane is now more revolutionary in its presence, so we are in a communication abundance (Keane, 2013, p. 1). Now, digital media has surpassed television, because when the internet was born, everything became collaborative. This digitalization requires innovation both in the editorial realm that produces content, including its business aspect. Thus, the cessation of print media, the decline of conventional bookstores, is part of the impact of digitalization in the media field. Hence, a new TIK-based culture was born, creating new habits and leaving behind old habits in the form of a digital culture. That the age of disruption is no longer a joke, because as internet usage continues to increase, it gives rise to a new public behavior, especially in accessing mass media (Kasali, 2017).

The type of media that has been digitized, according to Gane and Beer, is referred to as new media (Gane & Beer, 2008, pp. 6–8). There are at least four characteristics, namely; first, it is differentiated from the technology that developed before. Second, digital media can be connected to each other through networks that reach a wide geographical space relatively easily. Third, the remaining features of digital media are essentially more technical. Fourth, digital media works through compression processes, which allow large digital files to move through networks and be stored easily.

Digital-based media is not without risks, as the threats that may arise include its journalism tradition. John V. Pavlik describes how this digitalization of media is shifting the strict journalism tradition to become more relaxed. This means that there are new habits that emerge from journalistic activities that adapt to the logic of algorithms and pursue speed. The capital of journalism as an activity that is so strict in filtering content is threatened in terms of its value and standards, which can blur the public's trust in the media (Pavlik, 2001, p. xi)

The note is actually only a part of the phenomena found, besides the existence of new promising opportunities in the business and editorial sectors. Some examples include the availability of content that must be produced, creating interaction in the content sector, reaching audiences more widely, establishing closer relationships with readers, and other benefits that can be maximized by converging with various parties.

To ensure the extent of the media digitization process in the country, we can see its development through some of the following research carried out by media experts. The study begins with the general digitization process which then has an impact on the media industry. That mass media wherever it is not immune to technological development. Therefore, mass media in the transition to fully digital technology has been influenced both in terms of management, the devices used, distribution, and content. From the customer's point of view, print media has actually switched to online-based media. With a preference for reading news more flexibly anytime and anywhere (Aji, 2016)

Some examples of digital transformation can also be seen from some press companies, including large media group companies such as MNC (Mujiati, 2022). Even the digital-based regulation issue is driving the migration of broadcasting, especially television, to digital channels (Gultom, 2018). Although it is very late, the digitization of broadcasting institutions is still considered very important in order to be adaptive to the development of the times.

However, in principle, whatever happens digital transformation must be done because it is a necessity in the midst of the rapidly advancing era (Hadiono & Santi, 2020). The media must also consider the behavior of society that is already very adaptive to technology that continues to develop (Danuri, 2019). Therefore, the media industry must not ignore this shift in social behavior in its business journey (Respati, 2014). Whatever type of media it is (print, electronic, or online), there is no choice now except to adapt to technological developments (Putra, 2019).

Such as what *Antara* did, the change to digital format even more effectively reaches a wider readership (Mansah, 2019). As there was a shift in reader behavior, Antara tried to adapt. The same strategy was also implemented by *Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI)* with its RRI Play app (RIZQIANA, 2018), as well as print media such as *Go Girl magazine* and *Harian Suara Pembaharuan* (Rumata, 2018).

Print media, gradually shifts towards the digital realm and has even taken advantage of the Internet of Things (IoT) (Pangaribuan & Irwansyah, 2019). If print media doesn't follow suit and transition to online which is easier and cheaper to access, it will eventually close (Romadhoni, 2018). Digital transformation is more beneficial, as demonstrated by Kompas who was the first newspaper to create a digital subscription media as an extension of its print version (Haq & Fadilah, 2018). Similar to what Tempo has done in achieving convergence, print media uses a single newsroom strategy through tactical convergence, redesigning job descriptions, structural convergence, information gathering convergence, and storytelling convergence (Hana & Iswahyuningtyas, 2017). Nevertheless, with digital transformation carried out by Tempo and other media, it will impact the management of media companies, both in terms of human resources and content (Maulina, 2019).

The same goes for *Republika* since the beginning. In (Derviana & Fitriawan, 2019) study, *Republika* has applied all dimensions of convergence, although there are some obstacles experienced. However, with the presence of *Republika* online (republika.co.id), it is a manifestation of digital transformation itself (Puspita, 2019).

4. Result and Discussion

There are six people who clearly explain this policy, who are considered to have credibility and authority within the Republika circle, who provide parallel statements. The writings in this study are a collection of data that explains the process and prospects of the digital transformation of Islamic media, in this case Republika.

Among the names of the informants, their positions, and titles are: *first*, Elba Damhuri, Editor-in-Chief of Republika.co.id, with the title "*Transformasi Digital Republika: Dari UGC Hingga Demokratisasi Konten*". *Second*, Firkah Fansuri, Executive Deputy Director of Republika, with the title "*Mengimbangi Perubahan Teknologi*". *Third*, Subroto, Editor-in-Chief of Republika, with the title "*Kembali ke Jurnalisme, Kembali ke Republika*". *Fourth*, Nur Hasan Murtiaji, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Republika, with the theme "*Tantangan Mediamorfosis Menghadapi Generasi kaca*". *Fifth*, Arys Hilman, Director of PT Republika Media Mandiri, with the theme "*Ikhtiar Menumpulkan Paradoks Digital*". *Sixth*, Erick Thohir, (Owner of Republika) with the theme "*Perjalanan Penuh Makna*."

Table 1. Republika as an Islamic Media

Name	Statement
Erick Thohir	<p>"I am grateful for the opportunity to have been part of the journey of Republika since 2000. It's a unique story about my interaction with the dynamics of the Muslim community in Indonesia."</p> <p>"As a nation with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesia is extremely important to have a strong mass media with an Islamic nuance."</p> <p>"It is very appropriate that a number of ICMI, Muhammadiyah and NU leaders brought forth Republika"</p> <p>"With its uniqueness, Republika makes the information hub in this nation more balanced. Muslims also have a strong mass media with an Islamic nuance."</p> <p>"Since its inception, Republika also has the mission to continue promoting the values of humanity and nationalism in a harmonious manner."</p>

Table 2. Republika: Characteristics and Innovations

Name	Statement
Elba Damhuri	<p>"This principle (quality journalism) continues to shroud the contents of Republika."</p> <p>"Transformation and quality must go hand in hand in the digital media industry. There is no media transformation without the power of credibility."</p>
Firkah Fansuri	-
Subroto	<p>"Since the beginning, Republika has implemented strict journalistic principles."</p> <p>"Republika arrives with professional journalism standards that place it as a reputable and influential media in the country."</p> <p>"The journalism standards applied by Republika surpass the boundaries of general journalism standards."</p> <p>"(For its achievements and innovations), Republika has received various awards, both nationally and internationally."</p> <p>"Republika is a pioneer of online news portals in the country. Republika.co.id is the first news website in Indonesia."</p>
Nur Hasan Murtiaji	-
Arys Hilman	<p>"This is a media with qualitative superiority based on its influence among decision makers and its high reader loyalty."</p> <p>"Since the beginning, mainstream media like Republika does not sell newspapers, does not offer magazines, does not offer printed goods or just a website. Media in this category offers values to its readers."</p>
Erick Thohir	<p>"By presenting a special block model design, Republika looks more modern and clean."</p> <p>"Two years after its birth, Republika then began the development of the news portal, republika.co.id on August 17th, 1995."</p>

Table 3. Republic: Characteristics and Innovations

Name	Statement
Elba Damhuri	"This principle (quality journalism) continues to envelop Republic's contents." "Transformation and quality must go hand in hand in the digital media industry. There is no media transformation without the power of credibility."
Firkah Fansuri Subroto	- "Since the beginning, Republic has implemented strict journalistic principles." "Republic presents itself with professional journalism standards that place it as a reputable and influential media in the country." "The journalistic standards applied by Republic exceed the limits of general journalism standards." "(For its achievements and innovations), Republic has received various awards, both nationally and internationally." "Republic is a pioneer of online news portals in the country. Republika.co.id is the first news website in Indonesia."
Nur Hasan Murtiaji	-
Arys Hilman	"This is a media with qualitative superiority based on its influence among decision-makers and high reader loyalty." "Since the beginning, mainstream media like Republic does not sell newspapers, does not offer magazines, nor does it offer printed products or just a website. Media in this category presents values to its readers."
Erick Thohir	"With the introduction of a special block design model, the appearance of Republic looks more modern and clean." "Two years after its birth, Republic then began the development of the news portal, republika.co.id on August 17, 1995."

Table 4. Republic Full Digital Option

Name	Statement
Elba Damhuri	"The migration of print media into the digital ecosystem is an inevitability." "Machine/AI-Generated content (MGC/AIGC) becomes a need that must be provided by digital media." "The new Republic with a full transformation into the digital world is trying to answer these contemporary challenges."
Firkah Fansuri	"The development of technology must be acknowledged as both a challenge and an opportunity for the mass media." "Now, all the supporting factors for developing digital media are laid out in front of us. All the infrastructure supporting digital media is already available."
Subroto	"The decision of Republika to fully enter the digital world starting December 31, 2022 is not a completely new thing." "Republika colors more firmly the bustling world of digital with the journalistic values that have been maintained, and its mission to expand the reach of information and spread good values."
Nur Hasan Murtiaji	"Republika immerses itself in welcoming generasikaca - a term used for the generation that makes digital devices their main means of communication." "The complete transformation to digital technology as a platform for spreading information is the next right step taken by Republika." "Embedding artificial intelligence (AI) in Republika's digital ecosystem is a necessity in order to understand the desires of readers."
Arys Himlan	"In terms of (improving literacy), this is where Republika's full transformation to the digital world finds its relevance."
Erick Thohir	"At the age of 30, Republika faces an important moment to fully transform into a digital platform media." "This step is taken to remain relevant to the demands of change." "This is the first step towards making efforts for improvement and development of Republika."

Table 5. The Future of Republika in the Digital World

Name	Statement
Elba Damhuri	"The Republika newspaper with all of its content strengths remains in existence in a digital platform that can be accessed by anyone with a wider reach." "The New Republika puts the focus on the ecosystem, user-generated content, and engagement. The Digital Republika invites and involves the community to become an important part of the digital ecosystem."
Firkah Fansuri	"In facing various challenges (such as social media), as a main stream media, Republika will not follow suit in providing information that only pursues viewers." "By prioritizing quality, Republika will always present content that is responsible and enlightening."
Subroto	"Republika will continue to present professional journalism that speaks on behalf of democracy and economic justice." "In the future, Republika will facilitate content creators and citizen journalism to produce quality content with the standards held by Republika." "In the digital world, Republika uses correct principles. So don't believe the information before you read and see Republika."
Nur Hasan Murtiaji	"The vision of humanity and nationalism as a foundation in producing journalism is still upheld, even though the content is fully shifted to the digital platform." "Maintaining interaction with the reader community is an inseparable part." "In every way, Republika is committed to being present to its readers."
Arys Hilman	"The digital society, whether migrants or native, needs a professional online media that presents quality content, managed professionally, complies with journalism rules and is not trapped in clickbait or relying on algorithms alone."
Erick Thohir	"We hope that this community asset will continue to develop into a large house of aspirations for the Muslim community and continue to be committed to advancing Indonesia Let's enter the new phase of Republika."

The Republic is one of many national scale daily newspapers that clearly states its position as a representation of the Muslim community. Born from Islamic organizations and across Islamic organizations figures, this media affirms its ideology and brings an inclusive Islamic mission. The presence of the Republic also debunks the myth that Islamic media is only on the sidelines and cannot compete with existing national media.

To prove itself as a top-notch media, the Republic has been making innovations from the start, both in terms of design or print layout and in the selection of newspaper colors. In the digital world, the Republic showcases its class by pioneering the online news portal, republika.co.id, at just two years old (1995). Before the digital media boom in the country, when print media was still dominant and there were no signs of fading, the Republic had already started to enter a new platform.

In the last two decades, digital media has tightened. Even in the last decade, many media were disrupted by the development of information technology that changed people's behavior. Slowly but surely, the mass media, especially print, one by one declined. The impact of digitalization was felt not only by local companies but also by national media companies.

At the end of 2022, news spread about the end of the print version of the Republic. The public got this certainty through an open letter from the Director of Republika Media Utama, Arys Hilman, explaining the "Right Path of the Republic." Basically, the Republic started a new chapter of its media by taking the policy to go full-digital, starting January 1, 2023. The open letter confirmed the Republic's bravery in taking the step, even though it was acknowledged that the Republic was not bankrupt. This policy is normal for the Republic, as it has always been accustomed to its bravery in innovation.

The more advanced the technology, the more social media that has a widespread user base, the more it shifts the pattern of people's behavior in consuming media. This condition is what drives media to transform and adapt to the situation in order to still be accessible to the public. The digital transformation demand challenges the media industry to continuously adapt and develop its business model.

Transforming the digital platform is not a difficult task for Republika. In fact, this media has been playing on the online platform since 1995. That means, when it stopped its print version at the beginning of 2023, it did not mean Republika was just touching digital, but rather continuing and expanding it. According to its director, this is the first step where Republika moves in the full digital realm -- not starting in the digital world. If there are any changes, there is innovation there, and for Republika itself, innovation is a tradition, not something extraordinary.

The future of Republika has finally shifted to the digital space, which requires a new management pattern. Media packaging pattern, content management, design, and marketing. The digital world cannot be equated with print, these changes require new innovation and creativity. Republika has thought about this thoroughly by preparing adequate human resources and facilities.

When the leaders of Republika and its owners agreed to undergo digital transformation and stop its daily newspaper, there were consumers who had to be educated to adapt and follow Republika's steps. Because since the beginning Republika is a subscription-based newspaper, not relying on sales on the roadside. So one week before, Republika carried out education in its newspaper through opinion pieces from its decision makers. These writings were a strengthening of ideology, the reason for stopping the print version, why it had to be fully digital, and the optimism of Republika's future on the digital platform.

For Republika, going fully digital is a strategic choice. Basically, the digital platform has advantages both in terms of space and wide reach. That's why Republika sees great potential to further develop its media, provide space for collaboration with various parties, prepare the means to build engagement with its readers, and create a new advertising model with more creative packaging.

On the digital platform, in addition to developing various innovative things, Republika also ensures its quality. If the digital format usually focuses on speed, clickbait-based, and dependent on algorithms, Republika promises not to be like that. The quality of this media will still be maintained even in the digital space. This means that the integrity of the content is final and cannot be downgraded just because it has switched to digital.

In journalism aspect, Republika is committed to maintaining its quality. For Republika, what has become the public's trust so far is the result of good journalism, therefore that pattern will be maintained when transitioning to digital. Republika will be committed to discipline verification, balance, maintaining ethics, and avoiding traffic alone. Republika continues to present professional journalism that speaks on behalf of democracy and economic justice.

While still carrying the universal vision, Republika is optimistic that it will grow more on the digital platform. With a commitment to maintaining quality and Islamic ideology, Republika will continue to comfort its readers and invite them to collaborate. More than that, this full-digital Republika will still be the big house of Muslim community aspirations and will continue to be committed to advancing Indonesia. So, the public's concern about the decline in quality of Republika when transitioning fully to digital will be answered by the commitment conveyed by the policymakers, including its owners themselves.

5. Conclusion

The development of the domestic media is quite dynamic on the digital platform but is fading on the print platform. The print version of Republika was affected by disruption and had to end it by the end of 2022. As a result, following other print media that no longer exist, Republika chose to be on the 100% digital platform.

For Republika, being on the digital platform is considered more promising, as there are many opportunities that can be developed. With its innovative character, Republika sees this as an interesting challenge. At the same time, Republika also assures that being on the digital platform will not reduce the quality of content and will always maintain its good journalism tradition and its ingrained ideology.

This study was conducted when Republika's full digital version was not even a month old. Of course, there are no significant developments yet in terms of innovation and consistency of all that is promised. Further studies are needed to see the development and dynamics of Republika on the digital

platform, including management, content, marketing aspects, building closer relationships with readers, and consistency in maintaining its ideology.

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