

Soft Systems Methodology Approach to Mapping Sustainable Business Model Elements in the Indonesian Media Industry

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Abstract. *Indonesia's media industry is being reshaped by digital disruption and the concentration of digital advertising revenues in global platform ecosystems, with significant implications for newsroom employment and organizational sustainability. This study uses a qualitative systems approach and limits its analytical scope to the early stages of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM). Through a Rich Picture and CATWOE-based Root Definition, the study structures the problem situation and identifies the core activities required for a sustainable media business model. The resulting conceptual human activity system is organized around the Triple Bottom Line domains of Profit, People, and Planet. The model emphasizes three interdependent strategic domains: journalists' welfare and professional capacity, revenue diversification beyond algorithm-dependent advertising, and management of the environmental footprint of cloud-based digital infrastructure. The contribution is conceptual rather than empirically validated: the study clarifies stakeholder relationships, conflicts, and activity domains that can guide subsequent quantitative and structural analyses. These outputs provide a basis for future research using Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) and the Analytic Network Process (ANP) to examine causal hierarchies and implementation priorities.*

Keywords: Sustainable Business Model, Media Industry, Soft Systems Methodology, CATWOE, Triple Bottom Line

INTRODUCTION

The media industry occupies a distinctive position within modern societies, functioning not only as an economic sector but also as a key institution supporting democratic processes and the circulation of public information (McQuail, 2010). In Indonesia, this sector has experienced profound transformation over the past decade as digital technologies have reshaped patterns of media production, distribution, and consumption (Nugroho et al., 2012). Recent statistics indicate that online media and social media platforms dominate information access among Indonesian audiences, with digital media penetration reaching 94.25% (Kementerian Komunikasi Digital RI, 2025). While digitalization has expanded access to information, it has simultaneously altered audience behavior and disrupted the economic foundations on which conventional media organizations have historically depended (Westerlund, 2020).

A major source of disruption originates from the growing dominance of global technology platforms within the digital advertising ecosystem (Picard, 2014). These platforms capture a substantial share of

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advertising expenditure, limiting the ability of domestic media organizations to monetize audience attention and content production effectively (Westerlund, et al., 2020). As a result, business models traditionally supported by advertising revenues have become increasingly vulnerable (Chyi & Tenenboim, 2019). Faced with declining revenues and intensifying competition, many media organizations have implemented cost-reduction strategies to maintain operational viability (Arrese, 2016). One of the most visible consequences has been a wave of workforce reductions across major Indonesian media organizations, affecting more than 1,200 media workers according to recent industry reports (Aliansi Jurnalis Independen, 2024).

The implications of these developments extend beyond organizational efficiency. Reductions in editorial capacity may weaken the production of high-quality journalism and constrain the ability of news organizations to fulfil their public service role (Küng, 2017). Under increasing commercial pressure, media organizations often prioritize audience traffic and engagement metrics, creating incentives for content strategies oriented toward immediacy and visibility rather than depth and public value (Boczkowski, 2021). Such conditions may contribute to the gradual erosion of journalism’s normative functions as an independent source of credible information and public scrutiny (McChesney, 2015). Consequently, the long-term sustainability of the media sector depends not only on economic adaptation but also on the preservation of journalistic integrity and public trust (Sylvie & Gade, 2009).

At the same time, broader developments in sustainability discourse have expanded expectations regarding corporate responsibility. Organizations are increasingly encouraged to integrate environmental, social, and governance (ESG) considerations into strategic decision-making and value creation processes (Stubbs & Cocklin, 2008). Within this context, the Triple Bottom Line framework provides a useful lens for examining organizational sustainability through the interconnected dimensions of Profit, People, and Planet (Elkington, 1997). For media organizations, the social dimension encompasses employee welfare, professional development, labor protection, and the provision of reliable public information (Spark, 2021). The environmental dimension has also become increasingly relevant as digital media operations rely on energy-intensive infrastructures, including cloud services, data centers, and large-scale data transmission systems (Jones et al., 2023).

These developments suggest that the challenges confronting Indonesia’s media industry cannot be adequately understood through narrowly economic or technical perspectives. Rather, they represent a complex socio-technical system characterized by multiple stakeholders, competing interests, institutional constraints, and evolving technological environments (Jackson, 2019). The sustainability of media organizations is shaped not only by market dynamics but also by interactions among regulatory frameworks, platform governance, newsroom practices, labor relations, and societal expectations regarding the role of journalism (Hidayat, 2021). Such conditions exemplify what systems scholars describe as “messy” or unstructured problems, where problem definitions and potential solutions remain contested among stakeholders (Checkland, 2000). Conventional management approaches often struggle to address these complexities because they tend to prioritize technical optimization while overlooking social and cultural dimensions of organizational change (Mingers, 2006).

Although previous studies have examined digital disruption, media business model innovation, and platform dominance, limited attention has been paid to understanding these challenges as an interconnected human activity system involving economic, social, and environmental dimensions simultaneously. Existing research tends to focus on financial sustainability, technological adaptation, or regulatory responses in isolation. Consequently, there remains limited understanding of how multiple stakeholder perspectives can be integrated into a systemic representation capable of informing sustainable business model development in the media sector.

To explore this complexity, the present study adopts Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) as its primary analytical framework. Developed by Checkland (1981), SSM is particularly suited to situations characterized by ambiguity, multiple perspectives, and contested interpretations of reality. Rather than treating organizational challenges as technical problems with predetermined solutions, SSM conceptualizes them as human activity systems shaped by values, assumptions, and worldviews (Checkland & Poulter, 2006a). This perspective is especially relevant for examining the contemporary media industry, where

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economic, social, technological, and regulatory considerations intersect. In this study, the application of SSM is intentionally limited to its exploratory and conceptual stages, focusing on the development of a Rich Picture and the formulation of a Root Definition through CATWOE analysis (Wilson, 2001). This approach enables a structured examination of stakeholder relationships, systemic tensions, and potential areas for transformation.

By concentrating on these early stages of SSM, the study seeks to develop a conceptual map of strategic elements that may contribute to a more sustainable media business model in Indonesia. The objective is not to provide a finalized organizational blueprint but to identify and organize the key domains, actors, and activities that shape the sustainability of the media ecosystem from economic, social, and environmental perspectives (Bocken et al., 2014).

Accordingly, this study addresses two research questions. First, how can the complex challenges and stakeholder tensions within Indonesia’s media industry be represented through a Rich Picture as a human activity system? Second, what key elements and activity domains emerge from CATWOE-based Root Definition analysis in the development of a sustainable media business model for the Indonesian media sector?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable Strategic Management Theory

Conventional strategic management has historically focused on minimizing operational risks and maximizing short-term shareholder profits (Porter, 1979). However, the escalation of global business ecosystem crises and shifting market values demand a paradigm shift toward Sustainable Strategic Management (SSM). This new paradigm asserts that long-term competitive advantage can only be achieved when organizations integrate economic interests with social responsibility and environmental stewardship into their core corporate strategies (Stead & Stead, 2014). Within the media industry, the implementation of sustainable strategies is no longer a cosmetic public relations program but an urgent necessity to respond to market disruptions and preserve institutional legitimacy (Küng, 2017).

As one of the conceptual pillars of sustainability-oriented management, the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) theory introduced by Elkington (1997) divides organizational value orientation into three domains: Profit (economic), People (social), and Planet (environmental). These domains must not be viewed in isolation but rather as an interconnected ecosystem forming systemic interdependencies (Bocken et al., 2014). In the context of Indonesia’s media industry, which is under pressure from global platforms, deconstructing the TBL model is crucial for identifying organizational resilience elements (Westerlund, 2020). A sustainable media business model must maintain financial health (*profit*), safeguard journalists’ fundamental rights and welfare (*people*), and minimize the ecological footprint of cloud computing infrastructure and newsroom digitalization (*planet*) (Jones & Comfort, 2020).

Media Communication Theory and the Digital Ecosystem

Sociologically, the existence of mass media cannot be separated from its social responsibility to society. Theories of commodification and the political economy of media explain that excessive commercialization often reduces the role of media as a healthy public sphere, transforming information into a mere commercial commodity in pursuit of clicks and impressions (McChesney, 2015). In today’s digital ecosystem, media dependence on global technology platform algorithms has triggered a dual crisis: declining conventional advertising revenues and deteriorating journalistic quality due to the prevalence of clickbait content (Boczkowski, 2021). Consequently, media companies require strategic restructuring to restore the normative values of journalism without sacrificing corporate financial viability (Sylvie & Gade, 2009).

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The current cyber media market structure is characterized by a multi-sided market model, in which media must simultaneously serve audience needs while attracting advertisers (Picard, 2014). As global digital platforms consolidate control over content distribution channels and audience data, traditional ad-supported media business models face structural paralysis (Chyi & Tenenboim, 2019). To confront this disruption, contemporary media management studies recommend exploring new business model elements based on value diversification, such as subscription-based models, public donations, and socially impactful journalism (Westerlund, 2020). Identifying these alternative elements requires a comprehensive understanding of the relationships among media institutions, stakeholders, and state regulations (Arrese, 2016).

Soft Systems Methodology (SSM)

Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) is a systems thinking methodology to address real-world problematic situations that are ambiguous, complex, unstructured, and laden with multiple subjective human interpretations (Checkland, 1981). Unlike hard systems approaches, which view problems as technical-mechanical with predetermined goals, SSM perceives social reality as a human activity system characterized by diverse values, motives, and perceptions (Jackson, 2019). This methodology functions as a cyclic learning system designed to bridge stakeholder perspectives and achieve consensus on improvement actions (Mingers, 2006).

In its application to business model exploration, SSM provides systemic analytical tools through the construction of Rich Pictures and the formulation of Root Definitions based on CATWOE elements (Checkland & Scholes, 1999). Wilson (2001) states that CATWOE analysis enables researchers to deconstruct problematic situations into essential components: Customers (beneficiaries or those adversely affected), Actors (those performing activities), Transformation (processes converting inputs into outputs), Weltanschauung (worldview underpinning system urgency), Owners (those controlling the system), and Environmental constraints (contextual limitations). By applying this methodology, the boundaries and domains of human activity systems within the media industry can be systematically mapped, producing a conceptual draft model that is adaptive for transforming purely commercial business values into a holistic sustainability orientation (Checkland & Poulter, 2006a; Reynolds & Holwell, 2020).

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach within the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm to explore complex real-world phenomena (Yin, 2018). This paradigm is chosen because sustainable business models in the media industry are not static, value-free entities but rather social constructions shaped by stakeholders' perceptions, interests, and interactions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To structure the unorganized problem situation, the research adopts a systemic study design, restricting its analytical instrument to the initial stages of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) (Checkland, 2000). This scope limitation aims to holistically explore the situation and produce a conceptual draft model of human activity systems that is adaptive to sustainability values (Checkland & Poulter, 2010).

Primary data collection in this systemic qualitative study relies on in-depth insights from experts through purposive sampling techniques (Miles et al., 2014). The selection of informants is not based on statistical population representation but rather on expertise, professional track record, and direct involvement in Indonesia's media ecosystem (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The expert panel is limited to individuals with at least ten years of professional experience or observation in their respective fields (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). To ensure rich and comprehensive subjectivity, informants are divided into four main stakeholder domains (multi-stakeholder perspective):

1. **Regulators:** Representatives from the Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs (Kemenkomdigi) and the Press Council, who understand policy frameworks and publisher rights.

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2. **Media Industry Practitioners:** Executive directors or chief editors from national media groups directly facing revenue disruptions and labor crises.
3. **Academics and Experts:** Scholars in sustainable strategic management and media communication who conceptualize the digital ecosystem.
4. **Industry Partners:** Representatives from advertising associations or non-governmental organizations focusing on journalists’ fundamental rights and media workers’ welfare.

The operationalization of SSM in this conference paper is modified and limited to the first four stages of Peter Checkland’s seven-stage thinking cycle (Checkland & Scholes, 1999). This limitation is deliberately applied to focus the analysis on the transition from the real world to the systems thinking world in greater depth (Jackson, 2019).

The initial stage begins with exploring the unstructured real-world situation of Indonesia’s media industry through in-depth interviews and documentary studies related to financial crises and waves of journalist layoffs (Checkland, 2000). The raw information obtained is then extracted and visualized into a Rich Picture (Wilson, 2001). The use of Rich Picture is crucial for capturing connections, organizational structures, business processes, and points of conflict among actors involved in the digital media ecosystem, without being constrained by rigid theoretical boundaries (Checkland & Poulter, 2006a)

Once the problematic situation has been mapped through the Rich Picture, the next step is to formulate the Root Definition to express the essence of the ideal human activity system (Checkland & Scholes, 1999). This formulation is rigorously tested using the deconstruction of CATWOE elements (Mingers, 2006). The CATWOE components defined in this study include:

1. **C (Customers):** Those directly affected by system activities, namely digital audiences, journalists, and advertising companies (Picard, 2014).
2. **A (Actors):** Agents executing transformations within the system, including media management, cyber-technology developers, and content creators (Küng, 2017).
3. **T (Transformation):** The substantive process of converting conventional, disruption-prone media business models into resilient and sustainable models based on Triple Bottom Line values (Bocken et al., 2014).
4. **W (Weltanschauung):** The worldview legitimizing the system, which asserts that safeguarding the media industry through journalists’ fundamental rights and newsroom independence is a cornerstone of democracy (McQuail, 2010)
5. **O (Owners):** Those with ultimate authority to permit or restrict system operations, namely corporate media owners and the Press Council as regulatory overseers (Hidayat, 2021).
6. **E (Environmental Constraints):** External limitations beyond system control, such as global platform algorithm monopolies, advertising market regulations, and the readiness of environmentally sustainable digital infrastructure (Westerlund, 2020).

Based on the transformation declaration articulated in the Root Definition and validated through CATWOE analysis, the researcher develops a conceptual model (Checkland, 2000). This model takes the form of a logical arrangement of action verbs describing the minimum activities required for the human activity system to achieve its transformation goals (Wilson, 2001). At this stage, system activity elements are organized into strategic domains to reveal logical interdependencies among activities without involving quantitative testing (Reynolds & Holwell, 2020)

Qualitative data obtained from interview transcripts are analyzed using in-depth thematic analysis to identify recurring domains and system elements (Miles et al., 2014). To ensure data trustworthiness in this qualitative research, the study applies source triangulation by comparing perspectives across different categories of expert informants (Yin, 2018). Furthermore, the draft Rich Picture and Conceptual Model are reconfirmed with selected key informants through member checking to ensure that the constructed system model accurately represents their worldviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Exploration of the Problematic Situation in Indonesia's Media Ecosystem

The initial stage of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) is structured to explore and systematically map the real-world situation of the national media industry, which is fundamentally characterized as an unstructured or "messy" problem (Checkland, 2000). Based on preliminary assessments, expert insights, and documentary studies concerning the contemporary cyber industry, the Indonesian media ecosystem is currently marked by sharp, overlapping conflicts of interest among diverse operational actors (Hidayat, 2021). The foundational pressure originates from a drastic, generational shift in audience behavior, characterized by a massive migration to digital platforms that has fundamentally detached content consumption from fair economic revenue distribution mechanisms (Westerlund, 2020). This phenomenon introduces a deep systemic vulnerability across the industry; domestic media institutions have effectively forfeited operational control over their own content distribution channels, which are now strictly dictated by the opaque algorithms of global technology platforms (Picard, 2014). To capture these intricate systemic dynamics without being restricted by rigid, linear theoretical boundaries, these multi-stakeholder tensions were holistically mapped through the construction of a Rich Picture (Checkland & Poulter, 2006a). This diagnostic visualization successfully identified four distinct clusters of systemic value tensions, as conceptualized within the broader analytical framework in Figure 1.

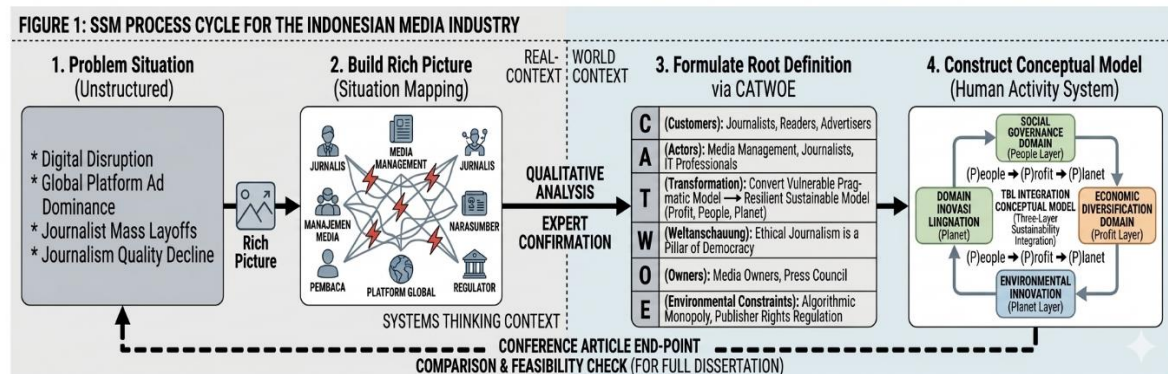


Figure 1: SSM Process cycle

The comprehensive narrative underlying the Rich Picture deconstructs several critical institutional dimensions. First, it illuminates severe internal newsroom conflicts arising from the divergence of professional values: the normative idealism of ethical journalism—which inherently demands extended time, rigorous validation, and significant resources for in-depth public investigation—is routinely subverted by a dominant managerial pragmatism that demands hyper-accelerated content volume to maximize programmatic digital advertising impressions and algorithmic engagement metrics (Boczkowski, 2021). This tension directly threatens the public service role of media by forcing a strategic shift away from public depth toward immediate commercial visibility (Küng, 2017).

Second, the system reveals asymmetrical power dynamics and heightened external tensions between local media organizations and global platform monopolies regarding the control of digital advertising expenditures (Westerlund, et al., 2020). Despite the formal enactment of publisher rights regulations intended to establish equitable economic compensation, the structural market imbalance remains largely unresolved, leaving domestic media companies highly vulnerable to sudden algorithmic realignments (Kementerian Komunikasi Digital RI, 2025).

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Third, this structural paralysis has directly triggered an acute labor and social crisis within the domestic media infrastructure. Severe financial declines have forced widespread cost-reduction strategies, manifesting as devastating waves of mass layoffs that have impacted over 1,200 media workers (Aliansi Jurnal Independen, 2024). These reductions severely erode fundamental labor rights, cause widespread employment insecurity, and compromise the long-term institutional capacity of newsrooms to generate independent, credible public scrutiny (Spark, 2021).

Fourth, the systemic mapping uncovers a critical, systemic neglect of environmental domains within the rapid digitization of mass media. The exponential expansion of cloud-based cyber media infrastructures, algorithmic data distribution systems, and massive storage data centers consumes energy at an unprecedented rate, yet this operational shift lacks a sustainable corporate blueprint for green technology governance or carbon footprint mitigation (Jones et al., 2023). By identifying these four interconnected friction points, the Rich Picture establishes that the contemporary media crisis is not merely an isolated commercial failure, but a socio-technical system collapse that requires a holistic, sustainability-oriented restructuring approach (Jackson, 2019).

Root Definition Deconstruction through CATWOE Analysis

To transform the problematic situation depicted in the Rich Picture into an ideal organizational model, a Root Definition was formulated to describe a human activity system professionally managed by media institutions. This system aims to transition conventional-pragmatic business models into sustainable media business models based on the Triple Bottom Line (Profit, People, Planet) by diversifying economic value, protecting journalists' fundamental rights, and optimizing digital ecological footprint efficiency amidst global algorithm monopolies and national regulatory constraints (Checkland & Scholes, 1999). The validity of this system formulation was then rigorously tested through the deconstruction of six systemic elements in a CATWOE analysis (Wilson, 2001). The CATWOE elements include:

1. **Customers (C):** Digital audiences as primary consumers entitled to quality journalism, and journalists as internal customers requiring welfare and safe working conditions (Spark, 2021).
2. **Actors (A):** Professional journalists, operational managers, executive directors, and IT developers executing transformation processes (Küng, 2017; Westerlund, 2020)
3. **Transformation (T):** Shifting media operations from vulnerable algorithmic advertising dependency to resilient, diversified, and ethically compliant business models (Bocken et al., 2014)
4. **Weltanschauung (W):** The worldview that healthy, independent, and economically viable media is a cornerstone of democracy and a fundamental human right (McQuail, 2010).
5. **Owners (O):** Corporate media investors, shareholders, and the Press Council as regulatory overseers (Hidayat, 2021).
6. **Environmental Constraints (E):** External limitations such as monopolistic advertising markets, regulatory uncertainties, and limited availability of green energy for digital data centers (Arrese, 2016; Jones & Comfort, 2023).

Taken together, the CATWOE elements reveal that the crisis confronting Indonesia's media industry is fundamentally systemic rather than sectoral or isolated in nature. The analysis explicitly highlights how immediate economic pressures, rigid institutional arrangements, deep technological dependencies, and normative social obligations interact dynamically to shape—and often constrain—organizational sustainability. By deconstructing these multi-faceted dimensions, the framework exposes the limits of conventional strategic management, which traditionally prioritizes short-term commercial optimization while neglecting broader human and ecological impacts.

Consequently, the formulated Root Definition provides a highly structured, teleological interpretation of the transformation required to systematically shift media operations from a vulnerable, algorithm-dependent advertising model toward a resilient, multi-sided value network. This conceptual transition balances financial viability with the democratization of the public sphere and institutional legitimacy

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(Checkland & Scholes, 1999). By redefining customers, actors, and environmental boundaries through an interpretivist lens, this systemic interpretation successfully bridges the messy reality of the digital ecosystem with a structured world of systems thinking. Ultimately, this analytical synthesis establishes the rigorous conceptual basis and operational boundaries necessary for developing the subsequent human activity system model, organizing logical action elements into interconnected sustainable domains.

Formulation of the Conceptual Model for Sustainable System Activities

Based on the CATWOE analysis deconstruction, a draft conceptual model was developed to systematically organize logical action elements into three main domains of human activity systems (Checkland, 2000). Rather than treating organizational activities as isolated technical functions, this systemic model maps them as interrelated processes driven by human decisions and values (Checkland & Poulter, 2006a). These three domains serve as the core operational pillars of a sustainable media business model, where each domain exhibits strict interdependencies with the others, meaning a failure in one domain directly compromises the viability of the entire system (Stead & Stead, 2014). This holistic alignment of activities is structurally illustrated in Figure 2.

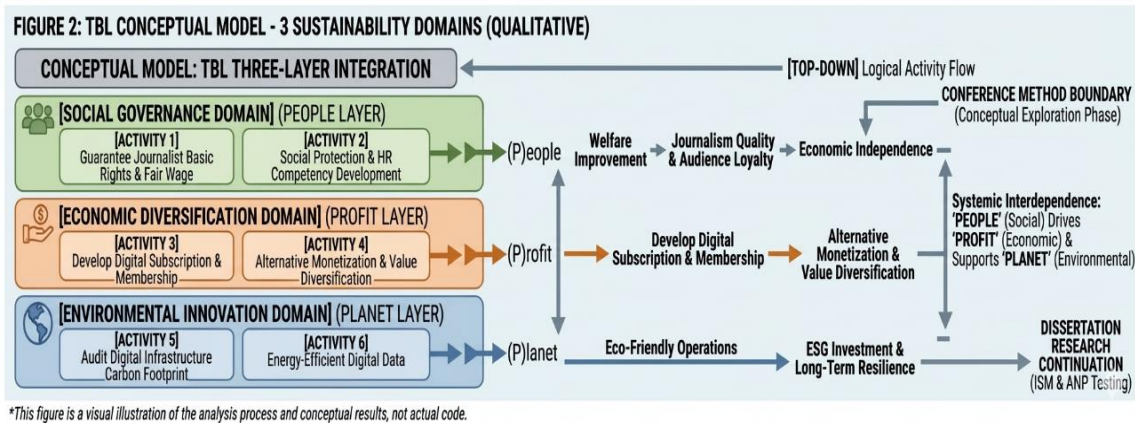


Figure 2: TBL Conceptual Model

The first domain focuses on strengthening the internal social elements of media institutions, positioning human capital as the foundational bedrock of organizational resilience (Elkington, 1994). Within the context of the current industry crisis, the minimum necessary systemic activities include formally guaranteeing journalists' fundamental rights and fair wages, establishing robust institutional labor protection schemes to mitigate employment anxiety, and executing continuous, structured digital competency training (Aliansi Jurnal Independen, 2024; Küng, 2017). Safeguarding these social elements is critical; when newsrooms protect the welfare and professional safety of their journalists, they preserve the core institutional capacity required to produce high-quality, independent, and ethical journalism that commands public trust (Spark, 2021).

The second domain fundamentally restructures the corporate financial architecture away from vulnerable algorithmic advertising dependencies toward strategic economic independence (Westerlund, 2020). To achieve this transformation, the conceptual model identifies key operational actions, including developing robust reader-revenue or digital subscription models, exploring diversified monetization streams such as public donations or socially impactful journalistic projects, and enforcing the transparent management of publisher rights compensation (Chyi & Tenenboim, 2019; Picard, 2014; Westerlund, Nyström, et al., 2020). By shifting the revenue base directly to the audience and establishing equitable terms with external platform distributors, media organizations can immunize their cash flows against sudden

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platform realignments, thereby stabilizing corporate viability without compromising public service values (Arrese, 2016)

The third domain actively integrates ecological responsibility into the core business canvas, addressing a critical blind spot in contemporary media management (Jones & Comfort, 2020). This domain operationalizes specific systemic activities aimed at optimizing cloud-based distribution systems, establishing green technology governance, and implementing highly energy-efficient digital architectures to minimize the corporate digital carbon footprint (Jones et al., 2023). Strategically aligning media operations with global environmental, social, and governance (ESG) investment standards does not merely fulfill an ethical obligation; it actively builds long-term institutional resilience, lowers operational energy expenditures, and unlocks access to sustainability-oriented global capital markets (Bocken et al., 2014; Stubbs & Cocklin, 2008)

Discussion: Toward Systemic Integration of Sustainable Business Models

Theoretically, findings from this qualitative SSM analysis demonstrate that the deep structural crisis afflicting Indonesia’s media industry cannot be resolved if media companies focus narrowly on one element or operational function in isolation (Jackson, 2019). (Within complex socio-technical systems, isolated interventions often trigger unintended negative feedback loops across the broader organizational framework (Mingers, 2006). For instance, conventional financial rescue efforts (*profit*) achieved by systematically sacrificing employee welfare and executing mass layoffs (*people*) have proven to backfire drastically; these reductions severely degrade core journalistic quality, erode public trust, alienate primary audiences, and ultimately accelerate corporate bankruptcy rather than preventing it (Küng, 2017).

Therefore, the conceptual model draft produced in this study offers an alternative circular-systemic perspective rooted in sustainable strategic management theory (Stead & Stead, 2014). Within this paradigm, strengthening the internal social elements of journalism is not treated as an operational cost center, but is positioned as the primary catalyst and driver for producing high-quality, high-integrity content (Checkland & Poulter, 2006b; Elkington, 1994). This localized value creation, in turn, builds organizational credibility capable of attracting independent, resilient, and sustainable economic monetization streams that immunize the media from global platform dependencies (Westerlund, 2020)

The explicit limitation of this study to the exploratory and conceptual modeling stages of SSM has successfully disentangled the historical complexity of the Indonesian media ecosystem (Checkland, 2000). By constructing a Rich Picture and mapping out systemic boundaries through CATWOE deconstruction, this framework successfully structures strategic activity domains that were previously overlapping, obscured by commercial pressures, and rife with multi-stakeholder conflicts of interest (Hidayat, 2021). However, as a soft systems methodology inherently rooted in the world of ideas and human activity system conceptualization, SSM modeling results are fundamentally exploratory and interpretive; they do not provide quantitative indications of which specific elements exert the most dominant causal influence, nor do they determine exactly how structural implementation hierarchies among elements should be prioritized in real-world application (Wilson, 2001).

This systemic and methodological limitation does not diminish the validity of the study, but rather underscores the critical necessity for subsequent research stages within the full dissertation framework (Checkland & Scholes, 1990). The conceptual system activity elements structured through this initial SSM phase establish the necessary qualitative foundation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the next phase of research, these identified domains and activities will be empirically tested for structural causal influence using Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) to map out hierarchical pathways, and subsequently weighted for real-world application priorities using the Analytic Network Process (ANP) (Reynolds & Holwell, 2020). This multi-methodological integration ensures that the conceptual "world of ideas" developed here can be systematically translated into an actionable, mathematically validated strategic blueprint for sustainable media management (Yin, 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the sustainability challenges confronting Indonesia’s media industry through the lens of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM). The findings indicate that the ongoing transformation of the media sector cannot be adequately understood as a purely economic problem. Rather, it reflects a complex socio-technical system shaped by the interaction of platform dominance, changing audience behavior, regulatory uncertainty, organizational adaptation, and labor-related concerns. Such conditions are characteristic of what systems scholars describe as unstructured or “messy” problem situations, in which multiple stakeholders hold competing interests and divergent interpretations of desirable outcomes (Checkland, 2000).

By applying the exploratory stages of SSM, this study developed a systemic representation of Indonesia’s media ecosystem through the construction of a Rich Picture and a CATWOE-based Root Definition (Checkland & Scholes, 1999; Wilson, 2001). The analysis identified a set of interrelated activities that collectively contribute to the development of a sustainable media business model. These activities were organized into three mutually reinforcing domains corresponding to the Triple Bottom Line framework: economic viability (Profit), social sustainability (People), and environmental responsibility (Planet). The resulting conceptual model suggests that long-term media resilience depends on balancing revenue diversification, journalistic welfare and professional capacity, and environmental stewardship associated with digital infrastructure (Elkington, 1997; Stead & Stead, 2014).

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on media sustainability by extending discussion beyond financial adaptation and technological innovation toward a broader systems-oriented understanding of organizational resilience. The findings suggest that sustainability challenges in contemporary media organizations emerge from the interaction of economic, social, technological, and institutional forces rather than from market pressures alone. Methodologically, the study also demonstrates the usefulness of SSM as an exploratory framework for structuring complex and ambiguous situations in which stakeholder interests, organizational values, and policy considerations intersect (Checkland & Poulter, 2006a).

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study remains conceptual in nature and is confined to the exploratory phases of SSM. Consequently, the relationships among the identified system elements have not yet been empirically validated, nor have their relative strategic priorities been quantitatively assessed. This limitation is consistent with the purpose of SSM, which emphasizes understanding and structuring complex situations before proceeding to formal modeling and decision-support analysis (Jackson, 2019; Mingers, 2006).

Future research should build upon the conceptual foundation developed in this study by examining the causal structure and relative importance of the identified system activities. Approaches such as Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) and the Analytic Network Process (ANP) may provide a more rigorous assessment of hierarchical relationships and strategic priorities among sustainability drivers within the media ecosystem. Such efforts would strengthen the empirical basis for translating the conceptual model into actionable strategies capable of enhancing the long-term resilience and sustainability of Indonesia’s media industry (Westerlund, 2020).

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