

# Self-taught Online Graphic Designer in Salaman, Magelang: Between Art Work, Decent Work and Vulnerable Work

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**Keywords:** Self-taught Graphic Designers, Decent Work, Vulnerable Work.

**Abstract:** Digital economy has opened up opportunities for anyone who mastered this technology to join in digital capitalism. The subject of this study was the self-taught online graphic designer community in Salaman, Magelang, Central Java. By take part in the contest at the 99designs crowdsourcing platform, they have experienced expansion of opportunities that provide financial empowerment. Initially they were workers in the informal sector that had difficulty entering established economic sectors. But empowerment they get from this online platform overshadowed by the issue of labour relations such as working hours, work status, wages, rights and work protection. But they did not question this because mainly their financial condition was much better. The government even welcomed this situation as a local achievement in the international world. This research was conducted during the period of 2020 in Kaliabu village, Central Java as the basis for the self-taught online graphic designer community with the largest members in Indonesia. Data collected by observation, interviews with relevant interviewees, focus group discussions, and literature study. Indeed, the digital industry promises to change the level of the economy for the better, but there is a threat of vulnerability to digital workers, especially regarding relationships and work status.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper tries to show how people in Kaliabu village – a rural areas – in Salaman District, Magelang capable of exposing themselves to the international level if they understand technology. This paper also aims to answer the threat of vulnerabilities behind opportunities in the digital industry.

Anyone who is good at digital technology can get involved in the digital industry as a decent job. However, behind the flexibility of the digital industry, there is vulnerability due to blurred boundaries of status and work relations. The subject of this research is an online graphic designer community in Kaliabu village, with Abdul Bar as the pioneer. Furthermore, we can also call them digital workers or digital labour.

Becoming a graphic designer is something that Kaliabu villagers never dreamed of. Even this profession was very strange to them at first. Everything changed when the Internet entered the

village and made them know the logo design contest from the 99designs site which then changed their profession to become graphic designers.

Kaliabu Village is located in Salaman District, Magelang Regency, Central Java. The village is located about 24 km from Magelang, 60 km from Yogyakarta and only 17 km from Borobudur temple. This village located in the highlands, making it difficult for agriculture to advance in this area. The condition of the village which is far behind in development, and the reluctance to become a farmer, has made Kaliabu village abandoned by its younger generation. They consider being a farmer as a job that is less prestigious and does not provide adequate compensation (Susilowati, 2016: 36). They prefer to leave their villages to become factory workers, employees, or other informal workers in the surrounding cities. As a result, the village of Kaliabu lost a lot of productive workforce because of its decreasing attractiveness.

The Internet entered Kaliabu village in 2005 as part of the government's Village Information System (SID/Sistem Informasi Desa) program, which

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includes village development and rural area development. This program is intended to increase the attractiveness of the village to their younger generations who prefer to work outside the Salaman sub-district. The government believes that improving information and communication technology infrastructure will reduce the digital divide and improve the economy of rural communities (Bachrein, 2010: 134; Wahyono, 2011: 31; Praditya, 2014: 135).

This change was pioneered by Abdul Bar (50 years), a former bus driver who later turned his profession to become an online graphic designer. He knew this logo contest from Aqib, an Internet cafe keeper in his village. Then Abdul Bar, under the guidance of Aqib, studied a graphic design program and started participating in a logo contest on the 99designs site. After trying dozens of times, Abdul Bar finally got his first win worth US \$ 400 (or about 4 million rupiah). This amount of money is very large for him compared to his income as a bus driver which is only 250.000 rupiah in 3 working days (Abdul Bar, interview, 5 September 2020). Abdul Bar was then followed by many Kaliabu villagers, especially young people, until the number reached around 250 people. They are self-taught graphic design programs and rely on Google Translate to communicate with their clients from abroad. Since then, Kaliabu village has been known as a graphic designer village and its economic income has increased rapidly. They call themselves the 'village designer'.

To win this logo contest, on average, everyone needs tens or even hundreds of times to send their work for the first time. Furthermore, to become visible on the site, designers must maintain their best performance. Being visible means that the designer's name must always be at the top of the list to win the chance of being hired by a potential client. Behind these efforts, there are hundreds of hours of work that don't count and the possibility of a winning piece of work being misused by other parties. Labelled status as a partner (Moncrieffe, 2007: 1) frees platform operator from work relationship responsibilities, such as: salaries, benefits, and work protection for these designers. This problem is also faced both self-taught and academic freelance designer, but the vulnerability tends to be greater for self-taught designers.

However, the threat of this vulnerability is not a serious problem for these designers. They consider their new job to be giving much better results than their old profession. Even the government considers this work as a local achievement in the international arena.

## 2 METHODS

This research was conducted during the period of 2020 in Kaliabu village, Salaman District, Magelang Regency, Central Java as the basis for the self-taught online graphic designer community with the largest members in Indonesia. Most of the graphic designers in Kaliabu village join the 99designs.com site. They are known as productive and highly dedicated designers because of their high level of participation, among others, by always sending dozens of alternative works in each contest. Even the 99designs operator itself holds gatherings almost every year as a means of appreciation and capacity building for these designers.

Technically, data is collected by observation, interviews with relevant interviewees, focus group discussions, and literature study. Primary data obtained from the research location, collected from interviews, including in-depth interviews, direct observation and online. Meanwhile, secondary data is collected from various documents, from books, other previous relevant research results, journals, printed and electronic articles, as well as other documents, both printed and audio-visual.

This study uses decent work criteria based on ILO (International Labor Organization) standards and Fuchs' political economy approach. Respondents were interviewed about their work experience as online graphic designers, motivation, experiences of success and failure, experience dealing with digital platform managers, clients, fellow graphic designers, and the government.

Interviews were conducted with online graphic designers represented by Abdul Bar as a pioneer. Then another interview as a comparison is with a professional graphic designer and representatives of the Indonesian professional designer association. Focus group discussions were also held with other online graphic designer communities to get second opinions and new information.

## 3 GRAPHIC DESIGN: AN ARTISTIC WORK

Graphic design is a general term for activities that combine typography, illustration, photography and print for the purposes of persuasion, information and instruction (Livingston & Livingston, 1994: 90). This definition shows that the field of graphic design is very close to technology and its development is greatly influenced by technology. Graphic design is

also often seen as a means of communication, including its relationship with industrial development which plays an important role in marketing factory products (Meggs & Purvis, 2012: 144).

In the technological development of graphic design, especially when phototype began to be commonly used in the 1960s, several special skills emerged, such as: graphic designer (who made page layouts); *typesetter* (who operates the typesetting equipment); *production artist / paste-up artist* (tasked with arranging all graphic design elements onto a page); *a camera operator* (who creates a photo negative from a pasted-up); *stripper* (tasked with compiling these negative photos together); *plate maker* (who is in charge of preparing the printing plate); and *print operators* (who operate printing machines).

However, during the last quarter century in the 20th century and the first decade in the 21st century, computer technology (and electronics) experienced a very rapid progress. This progress has influenced many aspects of human life, including in the field of graphic design. Then in the days leading up to the 1990s, gradually almost all of these tasks could be taken over by only one person with the help of computer graphics.

This development also occurred in Indonesia, before the entry of digital technology in the 1990s all design work was done with the help of hand skills. From making illustrations, combining photos, lettering, layout to production preparation, everything is done manually. This situation requires special expertise and high skills from the perpetrators, for that it requires formal education or deep experience to be able to get all of these skills. At that time formally, education in the field of graphic design or similar already existed in Indonesia, such as in Yogyakarta and Bandung (Kardinata, 2015: 111-115). Likewise, for graphic design skills in Indonesia which have a long history so as to create people who are experts in this field by themselves (Setiyono, 2004).

Graphic design experienced rapid development when computer graphics became known in Indonesia in the second half of the 1980s. The presence of desktop publishing along with graphic software makes it easy for a new generation of graphic designers in Indonesia. By 2000, more and more graphic design work became increasingly dependent on computers. The influence of computer graphics technology not only affects design techniques, design style, accuracy and speed but also allows anyone who does not have a graphic design education background to become a graphic designer. Although to be a good

graphic designer it takes more than just mastering technology, but also having broad insight, good artistic taste, mastering communication strategies, media strategies, creative strategies, finding the right visual communication solutions and so on.

The development of computer technology was followed by the development of information technology by the presence of the Internet. The rapid development of the Internet has opened up opportunities for anyone to learn graphic design by themselves.

#### 4 DESIRABLE DECENT WORK IN THE ONLINE WORLD

Decent work, job creation, social protection, rights at work and social dialogue are integral elements of the new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (sdgs.un.org). The ILO / International Labor Organization defines decent work as productive work; ensuring equal opportunity and treatment for all women and men; provide a fair income, security at work and social protection for the family; provide prospects for personal development; and giving workers the freedom to express their concerns, organize and participate in decisions that affect their work lives (Berg, 2018: 1).

The villagers of Kaliabu have been faced with an inadequate working situation because their village is not economically advanced. In addition, their average education level is only up to junior high school level, which means that they only have the opportunity to work in the informal sector. They have difficulty accessing established economic sectors.

Some of their young men are forced to work outside the village, including doing so as commuters. Some even work abroad as Indonesian Workers (TKI/Tenaga Kerja Indonesia). Meanwhile, some who still live in Kaliabu village, occasionally commit petty crimes, such as mugging people passing through their village roads.

Those who work outside the village or abroad are faced with situations of loneliness because they have to be separated from their families, and lose valuable time with their families, risk threats to their own safety and health in order to earn a living for their families. Likewise, those who commute from the village to their workplaces in the city face safety and health risks on the way, lose travel time, and have low incomes.

The emergence of a digital platform by offering crowdsourcing in Kaliabu village opened new

horizons of their job opportunities. The emergence of digital platforms is predicted to drive the economic process and technological innovation. Everyone can benefit greatly from this transformation because it empowers them to build businesses, trade, and exchange information online while avoiding the intermediary of companies or authorities (Dijck, 2018: 1). The crowdsourcing system is another form of sharing economy, platform revolution, gig economy, disruptive innovation which is the nickname for the most recent transformation of the Internet. Sharing economy connects people with the aim of distributing, sharing and reusing goods and services (Ravenelle, 2019: 26).

Crowdsourcing system is the process of getting services, ideas, or content by collecting contributions from a group of people, especially from online communities for various kinds of activities. The act of taking work that has been carried out by previously appointed parties (employees, freelancers or separate / outsourcing companies) and outsourcing it to groups of people who are generally unknown through the form of open calls, which is usually done via the Internet (Fuchs, 2014: 246).

This term is a combination of "crowd" and "outsourcing" (getting something from outside / external parties) (Ghazali and Nadinastiti, 2015: 88; 120; Berg et.al, 2018: 3). The term crowdsourcing was coined by Jeff Howe (2006) in his article in the online version of Wired magazine. Crowdsourcing then grew and became known along with the advent of Internet technology. Howe (2009: 1) says the crowdsourcing system the beginning of human networking. Although crowdsourcing is related to the Internet, crowdsourcing is not all about technology. (Howe, 2009: 11). The combination of the words "crowd" and "outsourcing" refers to the economic motivation for using cheaper, more demanding labour.

Digital technology offers many opportunities to join the digital economy. The offer to work freelance on digital platforms has also attracted the interest of many young people who are having difficulty entering established economic sectors. Factors such as work flexibility (time, location, type of work, rewards, etc.) are also factors in the attractiveness of freelance work (Sinicki, 2019: 3 - 7).

Communities or individuals can organize themselves through online networks, so that they are less dependent on existing legal institutions or companies. Digital platforms efficiently cut the path of an established organization, complicated regulations, and unnecessary costs (Dijck, 2018: 2). A crowdsourcing system in a digital platform is

considered capable of forming a kind of perfect meritocracy, which can eliminate all pedigrees, races, genders, ages, and qualifications, so that what remains is the quality of the work itself. (Howe, 2009: 13).

Since getting to know the Internet and mastering computer graphic technology, many Kaliabu villagers have the opportunity to work as graphic designers for the logo contest at 99designs platform. They become economically prosperous by earning thousands of dollars per month without having to leave their villages. This is considered as a solution to the welfare problems they have been experiencing. Some of them made this activity as a side job, but not a few left their previous profession to switch as online graphic designers. According to their admission, in 2013 they had received up to 45 billion in a year.

99designs is a global creative platform that connects graphic designers and clients online. Founded by Matt Mickiewicz and Mark Harbottle as a development of Sitepoint - a website that serves as a forum for web developers and designers. The company, which was founded in 2008 in Melbourne, Australia and also has offices in the United States.

This company wants to appear in a casual and humane manner which is manifested in the appearance of its website content, for example by including their office cat and dog in the staff list, calling the design process a fun journey, putting the human factor in the creative process, even calling humans the heart from this platform. In 2016 the platform has approximately 1 million registered designers and is divided into more than 90 expertise. The requirements to become a graphic designer for the crowdsourcing platform at 99designs are very flexible, regardless of the background of anyone who is interested in joining (age, gender, even academic background).

## 5 VULNERABILITY IN THE MIDDLE OF AN ADVANTAGE

The online platform-based economic model creates a new status and work relationship that involve three parties – the owner or operator of the platform, workers and clients. This relation opposes the concept of decent work which is basically based on conventional economic models. The most common work relationship is freelance work, as is the case with the self-taught online graphic designer community in Kaliabu village. This has led to the emergence of various problems and phenomena that

are close to the contradiction between the opportunity for digital workers to live more properly and the loss of various guarantees for a decent life itself (Juliawan et.al., 2019: xii).

Indeed, all parties benefit from this system. However, from a critical political economy perspective, we see who will benefit the most and who will be the most exploited in this system. The party who will benefit the most is the owner of the digital platform. Then comes the client, who has many opportunities to choose resources. While the position of the designer despite the advantages here, still exploited.

Fuchs (2014, 95 - 96) identifies three elements associated with the exploitation of these digital workers: coercion, alienation and appropriation. Fuchs says coercion is that users are ideologically "forced" to use the platform in order to stay connected in communicating, sharing and creating and maintaining business relationships. That way designers are forced to continue using this platform because without it they will lose the ease of finding clients. Meanwhile, the element of alienation is that the ones who get the most benefit are the platform owners and clients, not designers. Designers are put in a tough competition; they are competing to be visible to become the recommended graphic designer on the platform. The platform manager has the power to change the algorithm from time to time so that it can determine which designers can 'appear' or 'disappear' from the top view on the platform.

Data from the many designers registered on the platform have the opportunity to be sold or transferred by the platform owner to other parties for commercial purposes. Likewise, designs that have been submitted also have the opportunity to be abused by the platform manager. So that if this happens, appropriation of these designers has taken place. The incoming design works are then selected by the client and pay for the selected design. Meanwhile, designers whose work is not selected receive no compensation at all for the time, resources and effort they have spent. In this case, the most beneficiaries are clients who get unlimited sources of ideas at low cost and crowdsourcing service providers as their agents. Meanwhile, from the designer side, the speculation elements are very clear. Designers who have worked are not guaranteed to be rewarded for all their efforts (Pasaribu, 2019: 84).

The world association of professional designers (AIGA) and Ico-D (International Council of Design) classify crowdsourcing work as speculative work. This means that work is carried out without certainty that they will get compensation or with the hope that

one day they will receive compensation from their clients. As international designer professional organizations, AIGA and Ico-D, do not allow speculative work to be held for professional designers because it will degrade the designer profession. In fact, the two institutions have provided rules so that designers do not engage in speculative work. However, along with advances in Internet technology, business practices that place designers as objects of speculative work continue to occur. It is even more widespread, especially in countries such as Indonesia, where the designer and industry are still impotent (Pasaribu, 2019: 85).

The graphic designer association in Indonesia (AIDIA/ Association of Indonesian Visual Communication Design Professionals; and ADGI / Indonesian Graphic Designer Association) which is a partner of the government through the Creative Economy Agency provides recommendations on the issue of speculative work based on derivative recommendations from international associations. However, the recommendations contained in the book *Basic of Design Services Procurement and Management in Indonesia* emphasize more on rejection of the practice of free pitching.

The government realizes that a crowdsourcing system without regulations that protect designers will put the designer's profession at risk. However, as far as it is known, there has been no action from the government to ratify this matter.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Supporters of the sharing economy argue that they will believe that this new economic movement will be able to reverse economic inequality, stop ecological destruction, fight materialistic tendencies, improve workers' rights, empower the poor, and increase entrepreneurship. The sharing economy promises a very beautiful and employer-free future, where workers can control their income and working hours, and become a "cure" for the misery of modern society (Ravenelle, 2019: 5).

The sharing economy is considered a highly efficient reengineered consumption model in which a community of digitally savvy users, acting as both producers and consumers (prosumers) interact to share, exchange, barter, exchange, or rent goods and services online (Pauwels, 2015: 66). The sharing economy can also be linked to the concept of digital habits, which are based on community participation, collective ownership of resources, and sharing (Ibid.67).

But behind the rhetoric of empowerment, discourse on a new world of digital entrepreneurship and new creative technologies, the concept of the sharing economy obscures power struggles, labour issues, and reinterpretation of individual identities as workers and consumers (Ibid.67). From a labour perspective, claims to empower individuals and free them from exploitation and isolation are called exaggeration (Ibid. 75). Indeed, the sharing economy offers "flexibility", but it must be compensated for by a great deal of worker struggle, for example if workers leave the work platform for too long, they may be "removed" or "disabled from the community".

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