

# In the Midst of Truth

## *Verification and Ideology Dynamics for Indonesian Journalists*

Kencana Ariestyani<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Communication, Universitas Paramadina, Jakarta, Indonesia*

**Keywords:** news-story verification, post-truth era, digital journalism, phenomenology

**Abstract:** This study examines journalists in terms of how they interpret the process of verifying information in the post-truth era. Nowadays, mass media tend to comply with the interests and policies of the media owners. This phenomenon is likely to increase, particularly if the media owners hold a position as a chairperson of a political party. This situation often contradicts the journalists' personal beliefs. At the same time, the journalists are required to decide whether to follow the editorial policy or to uphold their values. This study aims to investigate the experience of journalists in the process of verification in the post-truth era. Therefore, the research question is: how must the journalists' experiences in the verification process be interpreted? Moreover, amidst the overwhelming exposure to information in the digital age, journalists tend to spend more time looking for news updates rather than verifying new facts. A media phenomenology method will be used in this research. The main focus of this study is the experience of the informants. The results of this research show that journalists tend to follow the ideology of the media owners with economic imperatives being the reason.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, mass media tend to comply with the interests and policies of media owners. This phenomenon is likely to increase, particularly if the media owner is a chairperson of a political party. Altschull (1984) cited in McQuail (2005, p. 226) states that news media content always reflects the interests of the media owners. Owners of market-based media seems to have ultimate power over the content of the news so they can determine which news content should be included or not. Meanwhile, a journalist also has personal values that they uphold. Indeed, these personal values can affect their journalistic work. Thus, the contradiction between the personal values of journalists and the ideology of the media owner occurs frequently. Journalists are required to decide whether to be obedient to the editorial policies or to uphold their personal values.

In the post-truth era, these circumstances are complex, where personal and emotional beliefs take precedence in shaping public opinion over true facts. In fact, in the mass media industry, journalists need the true facts to tell news-stories. Journalists also need data to convey accurate information. Especially amidst the overwhelming exposure to information in

the digital era, hoax and fake news are increasingly widespread. For this reason, verification of information before writing news-stories is becoming ascendant. This is before we even consider if the news content, which will be written, contradicts the personal beliefs of journalists yet is in line with the ideology of the media owner.

This study aims to investigate the experience of journalists in the process of verification in the post-truth era. Therefore, the research question is: how must journalists' experiences in the verification process be interpreted? Moreover, amidst the overwhelming exposure to information in the digital age, journalists tend to spend more time looking for news updates rather than verifying new facts.

## 2 NOTION OF POST-TRUTH ERA, VERIFICATION AND IDEOLOGY DYNAMICS

In the post-truth era journalists are challenged to uphold their professionalism and not implicate emotions and personal beliefs in their journalistic work. Medeiros (2017, p. 23) even asserts that in

journalism, post-truth represents a threat and an opportunity. Consequently, a professional journalist should always obtain qualified information and realise that the components of news ethics such as verification and accuracy as well as balance are highly related to their profession (Hoxha, 2016, p. 5). Therefore, verification should be done first by a journalist. They have to verify whether the information is trustworthy, then write it clearly so that the public can understand it efficiently (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2004, p. 21). However, journalists not only deal with facts – professional ethics dictate that journalists must remain objective – but also assess and verify facts (Martin, 2014, p. 5). Even Patria (2017, p. 7) emphasises the importance of critical thinking in addition to the ability to verify information due to the fact that journalistic investigation cannot stop at a single layer of fact. He states that the first layer of facts may be misleading, but the second layer, after the authentic facts have been dug up comprehensively, will reveal other truths. In brief, journalists should seek the truth and tell it as completely as possible while shaping their sense of critical thinking when putting facts into news-stories.

Ideological positions and arguments have an impact on the ethics of journalism in real terms. The impact is not only visible in the media and amongst the public they serve but also in the argument between journalists about personal beliefs, political beliefs, and loyalty. Even every day, both in the newsroom and outside work, every journalist carries with them emotional and intellectual attitudes toward their source and audience, as well as the news they report (Hirst & Patching, 2005, p. 29). It will vary among journalists, depending on the family background, education and friends, as well as the area and environment in which they were raised.

In journalistic work, every journalist makes important decisions about which events or phenomena and issues are to be reported and which are not. Vivian (2001, p. 239) even asserts that journalists bring personal values to their journalistic work and therefore determine which story to tell and how it is written.

Although journalists have an important role in deciding what makes the news (Vivian, 2001, p. 247), the ruling elite in the media they work for has the power to determine the nature of the news coverage. Unfortunately, media owners rarely admit that they manipulate news coverage for their own economic interests (Vivian, 2001, p. 248). Thus clashes of ideology between journalists and media owners occur frequently. Journalists who are

bothered by this condition have three choices (Vivian, 2001, p. 248) whether to persuade the media owner of their wrong way, obey the media owner's directions, or quit and move to a more respectable media.

### 3 RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a phenomenological method. The phenomenological approach is often called the interpretive paradigm (Lindlof, 1995, pp. 27-58 cited in Kuswarno, 2007, p. 3). The study of phenomenology aims to examine and describe a phenomenon as experienced directly by humans in their daily lives (Crotty, 1996; Spiegelberg, 1978; van Manen, 1990 cited in Asih, 2005, p. 1) or the experiences of the subjects (the respondents participating in the research) and how they interpret their experiences (Hasbiansyah, 2008, p. 178). Christensen, Johnson, and Turner (2010) cited in Simon and Goes (2011, p. 1) state that the main purpose of a study using phenomenology is to explain the meaning, structure, and group of people around certain phenomena.

The phenomenological framework requires relatively homogeneous participants. Therefore, individuals participating in phenomenological research should have experience with the same and a significant phenomenon in terms of the phenomenon under investigation (Cresswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994, cited in Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015, p. 9). In this phenomenological study, the method of data collection primarily involves in-depth interviews with the participants. The purpose of the in-depth interviews is to describe the meaning of phenomena shared by the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, in Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015, p. 9). The subjects of this study are individuals related to the research theme and willing to share their experiences in interview. Data gained from the observations and interviews were analysed using the phenomenological analysis approach of Von Eckartsberg (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 15-16, cited in Hadi, p. 8) through these steps: (a) formulating (or defining) the research question; (b) narrating the data resulting from interview descriptively; (c) analysing the data. The researcher reads and examines data carefully to disclose the configuration of meaning.

## 4 DISCUSSION

The phenomenological approach focuses on human subjective experiences. This study reveals that the experiences of research subjects in interpreting news verification within the post-truth era are as follows:

### 4.1 Verification of Information is Imperative

All respondents acknowledged that verification of information is significant before it is conveyed to the public. This is because verification is one tool to ensure that the news delivered to audiences is true and accurate: "It is important. Verifying news is a part of the basic principles of journalism: check and recheck, accuracy, and balance as well. That's what distinguishes journalistic products with other products" (R2).

Journalists realise that verification of information should be done first to ensure that the information is credible in order that the public understand it efficiently as Kovach & Rosenstiel (2004, p. 21) state: "Verification is crucial notably in the age of information overload. We call it the inflation of information. We should also be able to assess the information whether the facts are true or hoax" (R4).

Hence a professional journalist should always get qualified information and realise that the components of news ethics such as verification, accuracy and balance are highly related to his profession (Hoxha, 2016, p. 5). Moreover, it is also regulated in the Journalistic Code of Ethics that journalists should not make up false news. In other words, journalists must deliver news in accordance with the true facts. Thus, it is essential to always check and recheck the truth of the information. This is the experience of journalists in terms of the verification of information before writing it into news-stories. However when verification is fulfilled, sometimes journalists have other considerations in conveying news: "There are some considerations such as social conditions of society, timing and context before we publish it" (R3).

Another journalist revealed that many people think that news which has published in the online news media is less verified – along their experience in verification. People think that online news media are more concerned with immediacy in delivering news than verification. "But, actually, immediacy is only part of our work, accuracy is also necessary because in the following news we provide the completeness of the initial data that had already existed" (R1).

Online news media journalists emphasise that immediacy does not mean they ignore accuracy and verification because those two elements are mandatory in journalistic work.

### 4.2 Information Verification Should be Done with More than One Step

Verifying information is done through some steps by journalists. They referred to it as confirmation with many parties who are related to the issue being investigated. This layered verification method practiced by the journalist to keep cover both side on the news-stories: "...cover both side, especially for news that tends to discredit one party. We verify with many parties related to that information, particularly in the investigation... But obviously we do it (verification) many times according to the information we need" (R2).

In addition to covering both sides, notably for controversial issues, journalists will also seek experts' help, if required, for verification for the sake of truth in the information obtained.

This state is consistent with Patria's (2017, p. 7) dictum that journalistic truth should not quit at a single layer of facts. Thus, critical thinking of the journalists is crucial in addition to the ability to verify information. Journalists should seek the truth and tell it as fully as possible while sharpening their sense of critical feelings when putting facts into a news article.

In their experience, other journalists also stated that verification is done at least in two layers. Editorial and corporate policies that allow contradiction between a journalist and a media owner are the reason for this. However, if the information obtained does not have a big impact for the public, then they only do standard verification: "...if the statements of the source or event in the field has a big impact we will do a deep research at the office before writing the news" (R1).

Moreover, the position and ideological argument of journalists that has an impact on journalistic ethics are debated often in the newsroom. This is because personal values can affect their journalistic work. All in all, this causes fear in the age of post-truth, where personal and emotional beliefs take precedence in shaping public opinion over true facts.

### 4.3 The Dynamics of Ideology Occurs in the Newsroom

The contradiction between the personal values of journalists and the ideology of the media owner takes place frequently. This condition, however, is

considered reasonable as discussion is still possible in the newsroom. Based on the experience of the informant, personal values greatly affect their journalistic work. One journalist asserted that he decided to be a journalist to give a voice to the voiceless and help less fortunate people: "I chose this profession consciously because I feel I can help people, defending the oppressed people through my writing" (R2).

He seeks to convince his superiors of logical reasons to shift the angle of writing once a contradiction of personal values has taken place in the newsroom. "So far, if we can explain and argue with a logical reason they are willing to discuss" (R2).

Every day, both in the newsroom and outside work, every journalist carries with them emotional and intellectual attitudes toward their sources and audience, as well as the news they report (Hirst & Patching, 2005, p. 29). Based on their experiences, journalists sometime write news-stories that are in line with their ideology or personal beliefs: "...we can't deny the writing taste of a journalist, suppose he has affiliation with politics or other but it remains in the corridor that can be accounted for. We check the account before it is published to avoid tendentious news content" (R1).

Meanwhile journalists working in the media, whose owner may also be the chairman of a political party, experienced a strong clash of ideology and personal values. This condition occurred when they were writing political news. Although there is a media owner's intervention when writing news, verification and covering both sides of a story are still done. However, sources who support the media owner have a greater space in the news. "...supposed the media owner complained to us because he didn't like the content of the news-stories that we had written, then we change the angle and made the news according to his direction in the next day. Mostly, it happened in political news-stories because it probably has a direct influence to him" (media owner who is affiliated to a political party) (R4).

However, journalists refuse to write news-story if the contradiction between personal beliefs and the ideology of a media owner grow stronger. "...I've experienced this when writing a news-story of a political case that's involving a name. I believe this person is wrong, but people are talking about that, they defend this person. At that time, I refuse to write this because I believe what they told me is not true".

In journalistic work, every journalist makes important decisions about what events or phenomena and issues are to be reported and which are not. Journalists bring personal values to their

journalistic work and, therefore, determine which story to tell and how it is written (Vivian 2001, p. 239).

#### **4.4 Journalists' Tendency to Follow the Ideology of the Media Owner if the Condition of the Dispute is Still Conducive.**

Although the media owner highly interferes in the newsroom to determine news-stories, journalists choose to stay in the media where they are working for various reasons. "If I still feel comfortable, then I will stay. What I mean by being comfortable is the team and the salary that I receive. Our condition here is better than our colleagues in the other media who often contradict with the ideology of their media owner. I consider it a supportive team, so it isn't merely economic reasons. I am not eager to move and start it again from the beginning" (R1).

However, when the ideology clash has violated the basic principle that the journalists believe, they will choose to quit and move to another media: "If I can't tolerate it anymore, it means that, in the end, I have "prostituted" my profession for the owner's interest, something that has nothing to do with the public. This profession (journalist) is closely related to the public interest" (R2). "To date I have been staying because -I think- I'm still in a natural or common stage. If the situation is getting worse then I will decide to quit and move to a more respectable journalistic organisation. For example, they want us to write news-stories that strongly discredit someone. No, I refuse to do that" (R4).

This is in line with what Vivian (2001, p. 248) states, in that journalists who experience an ideological clash with the media owner have three choices. Two of them are being obedient to the direction of the media owner, and the other is quitting and moving to another respectable media.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

This paper examines how journalists interpret the verification of information in the post-truth era. The findings of this study reveal that verification remains important despite the ideological dynamics in the newsroom. Verification is done in layers to reveal the truth of information. The interests of the media owners do exist in the selection of issues and events that will be covered for publication to the public. The personal value of journalists also influences their journalistic work. However, discussions are

still possible in the newsroom when the contradiction of ideologies between journalists and media owners occurs. Therefore, journalists choose to stay in the media where they are working for various reasons, such as economic and social factors. Journalists will tend to quit and move to another media if the ideological contradiction cannot be tolerated anymore.

## REFERENCES

- Hadi, Ido Prijana. (tahun), 'Akurasi Berita di Media Sosial (Studi Fenomenologi Praktisi Media Pengguna Media Sosial)', Accessed 7 May 2018, ([http://repository.petra.ac.id/17697/1/Publikasi1\\_9602\\_2\\_3667.pdf](http://repository.petra.ac.id/17697/1/Publikasi1_9602_2_3667.pdf)).
- Hasbiansyah, O. 2008, Pendekatan Fenomenologi, Mediator, Vol.9, No.1, June 2008, Accessed 21 May 2018, (<https://ejournal.unisba.ac.id/index.php/mediator/article/download/1146/714>).
- Hirst, Martin & Patching, Roger. 2005. 'Journalism Ethics: Arguments and Cases', Oxford University Press: South Melbourne.
- Hoxha, Isida. 2014, 'The Accuracy, Balance and Verification of News, in Independent Press, During the Electoral Campaign 2009 in Albania', *European Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, Accessed 24 May 2018, (<https://www.sla.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Information-Verification.pdf>)
- Kovach, Bill & Rosenstiel, Tom. 2010. 'BLUR: Bagaimana Mengetahui Kebenaran Di Era Banjir Informasi', Dewan Pers, Jakarta.
- Kuswarno, Engkus. 2007, Tradisi Fenomenologi Pada Penelitian Komunikasi Kualitatif: Sebuah Pedoman Penelitian dari Pengalaman Penelitian, *Sosiohumaniora*, Vol. 9, No. 2, July 2007, p.161-176, Accessed 21 May 2018, (<http://jurnal.unpad.ac.id/sosiohumaniora/article/view/5384>)
- Martin, Nora. 2014. 'Information Verification in The Age of Digital Journalism', Accessed 24 May 2018, (<https://www.sla.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Information-Verification.pdf>)
- McQuail, Denis. 2005, 'Mass Communication Theory', (6<sup>th</sup> edition), Sage Publication, London.
- Medeiros, Armando. 2017. 'The Danger of Indifference to Truth', *Uno: Developing Ideas*, Vol. 27, Accessed 10 May 2018, ([http://www.uno-magazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/UNO\\_27\\_ENG\\_alta.pdf](http://www.uno-magazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/UNO_27_ENG_alta.pdf)).
- Patria, Nezar. 2017. 'Berita Palsu dan Disiplin Verifikasi', Buletin Dewan Pers, Agustus 2017, Accessed 7 May 2018, (<https://dewanpers.or.id/assets/ebook/buletin/646-AGUSTUS%202017.pdf>)
- Simon, Marilyn K & Goes, Jim. 2011, 'What is Phenomenological Research?', Accessed 6 Juli 2018, (<http://dissertationrecipes.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Phenomenological-Research.pdf>)
- , 2013, Phenomenology and Media Literacy, Accessed 21 May 2018, ([http://www.tojdac.org/tojdac/VOLUME6-ISSUE2\\_files/tojdac\\_v06i2103.pdf](http://www.tojdac.org/tojdac/VOLUME6-ISSUE2_files/tojdac_v06i2103.pdf))
- Yuksel, Pelin & Yildirim, Soner. 2015. 'Theoretical Frameworks, Methods, and Procedures for Conducting Phenomenological Studies in Educational Settings', *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry*, January 2015, 6(1), Accessed 6 July 2018, ([https://www.academia.edu/1526812/Qualitative\\_Research\\_Phomenological\\_Method](https://www.academia.edu/1526812/Qualitative_Research_Phomenological_Method)).