

## Perceptions of Television Journalists on the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia

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Article Info	Abstract
<b>Received</b> : 2022-08-06	COVID-19 is not the first outbreak to spread around the world. This
<b>Accepted</b> : 2022-09-28	flu disease, named by WHO as Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19), is
<b>Published</b> : 2022-09-30	caused by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2). Ironically, several studies on COVID-19 show that
<b>Key words:</b> perception; Covid-19; television	this virus is genetically engineered and is not the leading cause of death for the majority of COVID-19 patients. The COVID-19 pandemic has also triggered fear and panic in the community. This study aims to determine the perception of television journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. This research was conducted in two Indonesian television media, namely iNews TV and Metro TV. This research used a qualitative case study methodology with a subjective paradigm. The research results showed that television journalists perceive the COVID-19 Pandemic as a real ongoing situation. Their perceptions are formed based on scientific knowledge, empirical experience, attention, and current information. The panic and fear of television journalists at the beginning of the pandemic occurred due to changes in interaction patterns and the adaptation process.

### INTRODUCTION

The current COVID-19 pandemic is not the first disease to spread in Indonesia. In the book "*Resiliensi Mengahadapi COVID-19*" published in 2020, Indonesian National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB) explained that according to Portuguese and Spanish historical records, in 1558, there was a spread of Smallpox in the Maluku region which infected hundreds of people and caused dozens of people to die (BNPB, 2020). The outbreak then spread in Java through Batavia in 1781. Between 1625 and 1630, there was the spread of Tuberculosis (TB) in Central Java. According to the Dutch historical report, Graaf, this TB disease can infect humans and cause death in just a matter of hours. Hundreds of people died from this TB disease (BNPB, 2020).

The Influenza outbreak then became a pandemic in Indonesia, which occurred at the beginning of the 20th century. According to the article "De Epidemic" in the daily Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad on July 18, 1918, Influenza outbreak has infected millions of people in Indonesia, the data said 4.5 million people died as a result. The outbreak initially attacked the people of Sumatra, especially East Sumatra. To overcome this influenza pandemic, on November 16, 1918, the Dutch colonial government formed a countermeasures commission called the Influenza Commissie (BNPB, 2020).

The world's first flu pandemic known as the Spanish Flu which occurred in 1918, was caused by a bird virus that had transferred to pigs and humans. This pandemic swept across the globe during World War I in 1918, infecting 500 million people worldwide, killing about 50 million people or 2.7 percent of the global population (Marcola & Cumming, 2021). In 1976, Swine Flu infected 230 soldiers in Fort Dix, New Jersey and causing one death. In 2009, the new Swine Flu (H1N1) killed 90,000 Americans and 2 million were hospitalized (Marcola & Cumming, 2021).

The first Coronavirus infection occurred in Guangdong, China, in November 2002 (Anderson et al., 2004). The virus was later named severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV) or better known as Bird Flu (H5N1). This virus causes respiratory tract infections that lead to Pneumonia. It spreads very quickly and can cause death. In China, more than 8000 people were infected and 774 people died with a death rate of 7% (Smith, 2006). The SARS-CoV outbreak then spread to several European and Asian countries, causing panic and death in people. Globally, the outbreak was under control around July 2003. There have been no cases of SARS-CoV since 2004 (Peeri et al., 2020).

After the SARS-CoV, a new outbreak called Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) emerged. MERS-CoV was first detected in 2012 in Saudi Arabia, infecting 1364 people with a death rate of 32.97% (Mackay & Arden, 2015). The virus then spread to 27 countries in Europe and Asia from 2014 to 2016, causing 2,494 cases of infection and 858 people died with a death ratio of 34.4% (Al-Omari A, et al., 2019).

Another development of the flu outbreak was found in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China in mid-December 2019. WHO named this outbreak Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19), which was caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2). Coronavirus is an RNA virus with a 120-160 nm particle size. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, there were 6 types of coronaviruses that could infect humans, namely Alphacoronavirus 229E, Alphacoronavirus NL63, Betacoronavirus OC43, Betacoronavirus HKU1, Severe Acute Respiratory Illness Coronavirus (SARS-CoV), and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV). SARS-CoV-2 shares a similar subgenus with SARS-CoV and the bat coronavirus. (Gorbalenya, 2020). Therefore, the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses suggested the name SARS-CoV-2 (Susilo et al., 2020).

Similar to SARS-CoV, COVID-19 can survive at 4°C. However, in some countries, COVID-19 can survive in high temperatures, so it is difficult to predict the level of resistance of the virus. It means that the virus can adapt and survive in different environmental conditions. It is almost impossible to identify how this virus survives (Balachandar, et al. 2020).

### **Contradictory Information**

Several studies on the SAR-CoV-2 or COVID-19 show that this virus is the result of genetic engineering in the laboratory. Ronnie Cumming, in the first chapter of the book "The Truth About COVID-19, Exposing, The Grate Reset, Lock Down, Vaccine Passport and The New Normal", explained that the coronavirus was initially transmitted only to a few animal species such as bats and birds. However, genetically engineered RNA of coronavirus causes infection in human cells, disrupts the human immune system, and facilitates the spread of the virus through the air. (Marcola, Cumming, 2021). This condition was exacerbated by accidental leaks around the laboratory which caused the initial spread of the virus (L. Kuo, et al. 2020).

Furthermore, several studies break the assumption regarding COVID-19 which has been feared as the cause of the increase in the death rate of infected patients. According to Dr. Joseph Mercola in "The Truth About COVID-19, Exposing, the Grate Reset, Lock Down, Vaccine Passport and the New Normal", the SAR-CoV-2 virus is not the leading cause of death for the majority of infected patients (Marcola, Cumming, 2021). On August 26, 2020, data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) showed that of all deaths that occurred in infected patients, only 6% of deaths were due to COVID-19. Ironically, 94% of deaths are due to comorbidities or additional causes of death. On March 17, 2020, *Report sulle caratteristiche dei pazienti deceduti positivi a COVID-19 in Italia* reported that more than 99% of people died from complications related to COVID-19. It means that the death of a COVID-19 patient is caused by the patient's medical condition. As many as 76.1% of patients died due to suffering from high blood pressure, 35.5% suffering from diabetes, and 33% suffering from heart disease (Marcola, Cumming, 2021). However, the SAR-CoV-2 Virus worsens a person's chronic medical condition. Health experts refer to this condition as comorbidity. Condition of a weak immune system, low vitamin D levels, and poor digestive health worsen the condition of COVID-19 patients (Marcola, Cumming, 2021). In other words, this laboratory-engineered viral infection is not lethal to people who do not have comorbidities.

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Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, there has not been an official drug for COVID-19. Several drugs considered to be able to cure COVID-19, such as the antiviral Remdesivir, Nebulized Hydrogen Peroxide, Ivermectin, and others, have not been 100% proven to cure COVID-19 patients. Meanwhile, the use of vaccines is still a problem. According to Peter Doshi (2020), the main purpose of vaccination during the COVID-19 pandemic is to prevent people from getting sick and dying. However, there are no accurate studies on whether vaccination can permanently prevent the infection of the SARS-CoV-2 virus or not (Marcola, Cumming, 2021).

Another problem lies in the SAR-CoV-2 virus detection tools such as PCR and antigen tests. Portuguese court ruled that PCR tests are unreliable for detecting the virus, using PCR test results to force a person to self-quarantine is unlawful (Borger et.al 2020).<sup>12</sup> Chinese government limits the use of PCR tests for the public unless they really show severe symptoms (Durden, 2020).

One of the efforts to break the transmission chain of COVID-19 is the lockdown policy or social restrictions. Governments around the world take the policy to reduce crowds, one of which is by instructing the closure of public places within a certain period (Vellingiri et al., 2020). On the other hand, the lockdown policy has an impact on socio-economic damage such as slowing economic growth in several countries and increasing cases of domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, and suicide. In Massachusetts, America, cases of domestic violence doubled at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic from March 11 to May 3, 2020 (Mozes, 2020). On November 27, 2020, the Japanese government statistics showed the number of suicides was 2,153 during the COVID-19 pandemic, higher than the number of suicides in normal conditions, which was 2,087 (Wang et.al, 2020).

### **Fear and Panic**

The perception of Covid-19 as something very contagious and deadly has created fear and panic among the community. Some frightening information about the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbate the public fears, such as the absence of proper treatment and standard health protocols to protect the community from COVID-19, the unavailability of masks for the community, the unpreparedness of hospital occupations and medical equipment in treating COVID-19 patients, and daily statistical information on the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths (Lilleker, et al 2021). Certain parties use the condition of fear and panic during the COVID-19 pandemic for their business and political gain. They take advantage of the fear, helplessness, and confusion that surround the world to increase their business profits and political influence. They spread false information, offering fake treatments like vaccines and drugs to dominate the world community for their sake. (Marcola & Cumming, 2021).

The public fears occurred due to the unpreparedness of the government and the media as a reference in dealing with COVID-19. According to BNPB, governments around the world stuttered facing the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic due to their inability, unpreparedness, and confusion (BNPB, 2020). The media experienced the same condition. A survey of the Center of Economic Development Study (CEDS) of Padjadjaran University on 98 journalists, showed that 45.92% of journalists experienced symptoms of depression such as fear, restless sleep, and feeling under pressure as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic (Awaluddin, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic leads a new pressure for journalists in the field. Journalists are also victims of the pandemic conditions they cover. Fear of working in isolation, increased workload, longer working hours, the psychological impact of COVID-19 information, and fear of losing their job are the main triggers of stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hoak, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic creates challenges for journalists and the media to contribute in dealing with the crisis. Television coverage plays an important role in disseminating information during the pandemic. The role of the media is not only to disseminate information (early warning system) but also to provide information on how to deal with disasters, especially disaster risk (disaster risk reduction) (Masduki, 2007).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This research took insight from several related studies. Research by Assistant Professor of Journalism in Kent State University, Gretchen Hoak (2021) entitled “Covering COVID: Journalists’ Stress and Perceived Organizational Support While Reporting on the Pandemic” examined the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on journalists’ stress and the role of organization support in overcoming it. Hoak found that the COVID-19 pandemic forces unprecedented changes on journalists in the United States. She also found that organizational support greatly affects the stress and performance of journalists in the United States (Hoak, G. 2021).

Research by Gong et.al (2021) entitled “Media attention, Dependency, Self-Efficacy, and Prosocial Behaviours during the Outbreak of COVID-19: A Constructive Journalism Perspective” examined media attention, media dependence, and prosocial behavior among audiences in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors stated that the media plays an important role in disseminating information during the pandemic crisis, therefore, it is necessary to examine how the media influence their audience behavior. Media attention and dependence act through self-efficacy to develop prosocial behavior during the pandemic (Gong et al., 2021).

### Conceptual framework

Furthermore, according to Jalalludin Rakhmad (1992), Perception is the experience of objects, events, and relationships obtained by inferring information and interpreting messages. Two factors influence a person’s perception of an event, namely functional factors such as needs, past experiences, mental readiness, emotional state, cultural background, and frames of reference; and structural factors that are physical stimuli and nervous effects produced by the individual nervous system. Structural factors explained that when we perceive something we should perceive it as a whole, not in parts (Jalalludin, 1992). These two factors affect a person’s perception of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gibson (1985) stated that perception is a person’s cognitive process in interpreting and understanding the world around him. Perception includes stimulus acceptance, stimulus organization, and stimulus interpretation that can influence the formation of behavior and attitude (Gibson, 1985). Similar to Jalalludin Rakhmat, Gibson suggests two factors that influence perception, as follows:

1. Internal factors, namely factors within the individual which includes several things:
  - a. Physiological. A person’s perception begins with the response of the five senses. The five senses will translate the information they receive into the interpretation of a phenomenon.
  - b. Attention. Individuals need a certain amount of energy to focus on an object. Different amounts of energy will affect their perception of the object.
  - c. Interest. Interest in the object becomes a stimulus in perceiving the object. How much a person’s interest in an object affects his perception of the object.
  - d. Similarity in needs. A person’s similarity with an object can affect his perception of the object.
  - e. Experience and Memory. A person’s experience becomes a stimulus that influences his perception.
  - f. Emotional state. The emotional state affects a person’s perception of the object.
2. External factors, namely the characteristics of the environment and the objects seen in it. These elements can change a person’s perspective on the world around him and affect how he perceives it (Gibson 1985). External factors include:
  - a. Size and placement of the object or stimulus. The greater the relationship between objects, the easier it is to understand.
  - b. Color of the object. Objects with more light are easier to be perceived than those with less light.
  - c. Uniqueness and contrast of the stimulus. External stimuli with background and surroundings that are completely beyond the expectations of other individuals will attract a lot of attention.

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- d. Intensity and strength of the stimulus. The strength of the stimulus becomes the power of an object that can affect perception.
- e. Motion or movement of the object. Perception pays more attention to moving objects within the range of view than stationary objects.

However, these internal and external factors are not always harmonious in the process of building perceptions. Perception is born from the dialectic between internal factors as the will and external factors as the reality. Sometimes external factors are more dominant in perceiving information on Covid-19, but sometimes internal factors also greatly influence it. This dialectic becomes a dynamic process in interpreting the Covid-19 pandemic that directs the work of journalists during the ongoing pandemic

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research uses the constructivism paradigm. Humans construct their knowledge through their interactions with objects, phenomena, experiences, and environments. In constructivism, knowledge cannot simply be transferred from one person to another but is interpreted by each person. Everyone has to construct their knowledge. Constructivism is when individuals try to understand their home and work environment (Creswell, 2014).

This research uses a qualitative case study methodology. Qualitative study examines things in the natural environment, seeks to understand or interpret phenomena based on existing things (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). In this research, the researchers use a qualitative method to explain the perception of television journalists on the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia. The research case study is based on in-depth investigations of individuals' perception of the events resulting from COVID-19 and explores the underlying principles. Data collection techniques used are interview and literature study. To obtain comprehensive information, the researchers explored information from participants and key informants, their track records, and the people around them (Yin, R. K, 2002).

This research was conducted in two Indonesian television media, namely iNews TV and Metro TV. The research subjects are the editorial staff of iNews TV and Metro TV. The research object is the perspective of television journalists on the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Television journalists' perceptions of the existence of COVID-19 are formed based on various aspects. The first aspect is scientific knowledge, obtained from the literature and information from previous events. Deputy Chief Editor of iNews, Latief Siregar believes that COVID-19 is a virus that exists scientifically and technologically. He stated that COVID-19 was a pre-existing virus. Similar viruses that previously existed and spread to Indonesia were Bird Flu and Camel Flu (MERS) which exists in Saudi Arabia and infects Indonesian pilgrims when returning from performing Hajj and Umrah there. Therefore, the COVID-19 virus did not suddenly appear without any prior foundation. The existence of this virus can be proven scientifically and in data (Interview, 2022).

The second aspect is empirical experience. News Production Manager, Nabil Basalamah initially did not believe in the existence of COVID-19. He explains,

*"At first my friends and I couldn't understand why something invisible could be a disaster. We deny the existence of COVID-19 but panic at the same time because there were not many masks, hand sanitizers, and treatments available at that time." (Interview 2022).*

Nabil further explained that after he, his family, and friends suffered from the illness caused by COVID-19, his perception of the COVID-19 pandemic changed, he believed that the pandemic exists and is horrendous. He states,

*“My belief about the existence of COVID-19 started when my father, mother, sister, and brother-in-law were infected during the Delta variant. My father was hospitalized for 16 days. Some of my friends at work have also been infected. After that, we began to dig up all the information on COVID-19. And we start to perceive it with the help of empirical data we find in the field.”* (Interview 2022).

The third aspect is information and current events. News Reporter Metro TV, Yusrin Zata Lini sees the COVID-19 pandemic as an event that changes people not only in health aspects but also in socio-economic and cultural aspects. To increase her knowledge about COVID-19, Yusrin conducted interviews with people who are capable in their fields and read summaries of research related to COVID-19. She stated that like it or not, people have to adapt to the pandemic itself because the pandemic has changed people's behavior, perspective, and problem-solving in various aspects of lives (Interview 2022). She explains,

*“The perspective I understand (about COVID-19) is based on my work activities related to current information and events. The COVID-19 perspective covers current issues and events on how this virus affects us. There are times when we experience culture shock in the field. I have witnessed how people perceive and experience the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, I see friends who have been affected by COVID-19 both themselves and their families, and many have lost their jobs. Maybe my job is influencing my perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic.”* (Interview 2022).

The fourth aspect is attention. This aspect explains how attention in overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic forms the perception of the COVID-19 pandemic itself. Chief Editor of News, Apreyvita Wulansari believes that the COVID-19 pandemic is a very serious event that requires joint handling from all parties. She explains,

*“I am concerned about COVID-19 handling because I was assigned as a representative of the MNC Group in the BNPB task force with Mr. Suryopratomo (former Pimred Metro TV), helping him in the communication field. It is the point why I am very concerned about the problem of COVID-19 treatment and how we prevent increasing cases of COVID-19.”* (Interview 2022).

Television journalists are also dealing with contradictory information about COVID-19 circulating in the community. In general, television journalists believe in some of the contradictory information. For example, they believe that COVID-19 is genetic engineering and that some parties use the pandemic conditions for personal gain. Nabil Basalamah believes that certain parties have engineered the COVID-19 virus. He thinks the coronavirus variant cannot develop quickly from the alpha, beta, delta to the current omicron variant without human intervention. In dealing with contradictory information, journalists try to summarize the pros and cons of the data that can be accounted for. He explained, *“Both pros and cons data must be empirical, then we try to present them but we do not make conclusions about which data is right or wrong.”* (Interview 2022).

Meanwhile, Yusrin Zata Lini perceives COVID-19 not only by looking at the pros and cons, but requires various perspectives because the disease is still under research and the cure is still under research and development, thus everyone is equally learning not to see from only two perspectives of pros and cons. According to Yusrin, assessing public opinion needs data clarification. The government, experts and people who are competent in their fields are the right sources to clarify data. She further explained that in reporting news, journalists rely on several

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data sources. When the journalists found a discrepancy between the data, they will juxtapose all the data in the news.

Furthermore, the panic and fear that television journalists experienced at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic were due to the lack of preparation in dealing with the shocking situation and work adjustments due to changing patterns of human interaction during the pandemic. Production Manager of Metro TV, Kabul Indrawan stated that the television media industry does not yet have preparations to deal with the pandemic disaster. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia around January 2020, Metro TV did not have any preparations to face the pandemic situation. Even the management did not have a policy for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic (Interview 2020).

According to Apreyvita, the panic that occurs is a work adjustment process. The state of panic was not only in the media sector but in all sectors. She further explained that the changes in interaction and communication shock everyone at first and finally everyone is aware of their duties and obligations. Television has prime time programs in the morning and afternoon but the rhythm changes completely during a pandemic, and everyone in the media needs time to adapt to the changes.

## CONCLUSION

Television journalists perceived the COVID-19 Pandemic as a real ongoing situation. The perceptions of journalists and television editors are the result of their experience and understanding who see the COVID-19 pandemic as a disaster that has an impact on themselves and their environment. Their perceptions are formed based on scientific knowledge, empirical experience, attention, and the latest information they get. The pro-contra dialectic regarding the information of the COVID-19 pandemic also encourages the formation of their perception. In dealing with this dialectic, television journalists seek to verify the pros and cons of data that can be empirically accounted for, and, if the data are not aligned, journalists will present it without judging which data is true or false

The panic and fear that television journalists experienced at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic were due to health and economic repercussions. In addition, the pandemic conditions have also resulted in changes in work rhythms and the absence of reporting standards, journalists need to adapt to all these changes.

## Suggestion

This case study research of the perception of television journalists on the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia is limited to a perceptual perspective, while there are many other perspectives such as motives, sensations, concerns, and other psychological and sociological aspects that are very useful in studying the media reporting process, especially in television. It needs further research to find out how the process of reporting on the Covid-19 pandemic affects individuals as a whole. Further research may examine the psychological aspects of television journalists such as their motives for making the COVID-19 pandemic news, their attention to the reality of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the sensation of the news. Another way, further research may also examine the sociological aspects of television journalists, for example, research on the influence of changes in social interaction and communication on the Covid-19 reporting process.

Furthermore, this research only takes a subjective paradigm based on the ratio of science. Further development of this research can take an empirical objective paradigm with qualitative data.

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