

# Papua and the public

## News framing of the Asrama Papua 2019 conflict

**Abstract:** The 2019 Asrama Papua conflict in Surabaya initiated many discourses on racial discrimination and police brutality towards Papuan students in Indonesia. The question arises as to how the public perceive news framing and its effects on public opinion. This question will be answered by examining reports in the newspapers *Kompas* (published in Jakarta) and *Jubi* (Jayapura, Papua) which display quite different thematic and rhetorical structures. As secondary research, this article aims to assess the public opinion on the framing of the incident based on Berger and Luckmann's Social Construction of Reality. Through qualitative focus group discussion, this study examines people's perceptions of news media framing and its effect on the shaping of public opinion towards an ethnic minority group. The results show that media framing reinforces a certain idea of public opinion towards minority groups through various factors such as Perspective of Reporting and Depth of Reporting, both of which differ in *Kompas* and *Jubi* as a result of differences in their audiences. Differences were also found in such factors as the thematic structure between lens of sympathy and lens of antagonism. Ultimately, this research suggests that the public possess an awareness of news framing, thus giving them the capability to construct their own critical viewpoints towards media and the incident.

**Keywords:** Asrama, Indonesia, *Jubi*, *Kompas*, media, news framing, Papuans, public opinion, racial representation, racism, West Papua

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### Introduction

**I**N 2019, a riot erupted near a Papuan student dormitory in Surabaya. Prompted by allegations about desecration of the Indonesian flag, the incident ignited a riot along with discourses on issues such as justice, racial discrimination and police brutality towards Papuans as an ethnic minority in Indonesia. Similarly, discourses on media framing about Papuans as an ethnic minority also swept the Indonesian news media coverage, raising questions about effects that framing may have on the public.

As the event, also known in Western media as the 2019 Papuan Uprising, had been covered in various online news outlets, a primary study (Putri, 2020) was conducted to analyse the difference of framing between *Kompas* as one of the more mainstream nation-wide news outlets, and *Jubi* as the community-oriented and local media with a focus on reporting on Papuan lives in Indonesia. Within the study, it was found that the ways in which the event had been portrayed varied across media platforms, the factors of which relied on the scale of the publication as well as the targeted audience.

It is the intention of this study to analyse the connections between news framing and the shaping of public opinion. Lippmann (1922) suggested that public opinion was the phenomenon wherein media exposure influenced internally perceived images and public opinion about external events. In fact, news framing and public opinion are found to be closely related (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2012).

This research is the extension of an early research on news framing towards the 2019 Asrama Papua (Papuan student dorm) conflict between national Indonesian media (*Kompas*) and local Papuan media (*Jubi*). The early research found that the news framing by both media was centered around thematic and rhetorical structures, with *Kompas* emphasising conflict-oriented angles while *Jubi* used more sympathetic and human interest angles (Putri, 2020). To validate that research, this study examined people's perceptions about news framing of the conflict by the two media and assessed their views on the role of media in reinforcing stereotypes. The study employed a focus group discussion with members of the public.

### **Papuans in the media**

Media framing about Papuans as an ethnic minority in Indonesia has been the subject of previous studies. Ranging from news reporting articles to media representation, these studies have taken the lens of content or framing analysis. The common findings of the studies suggest that news framing about Papuans appear in the form of a lexical choice through keywords with negative connotations (e.g., rioting, separatist, clash, among others) and limited stories and biased representation (Kirsch, 2010; Murtadho & Ningsih, 2017; Dalimunthe et al., 2020). The 2019 Surabaya conflict prompted many discourses and protests regarding Papuans in the media (Lopez, 2020; Robie, 2020).

In addition to lexical choices, a study by Syabilla (2020) pointed out that discrepancies in constructing news narratives about Papuans in news outlets can be examined through the script structure, of which there are two common structures between the national and international media, problem-oriented and chronological-retelling structure, respectively. Aside from script structure, Widyaningsih and Lestari (2020) highlighted the influence of thematic structure on news framing, stating that news narratives on Papuans were often presented in two

different thematic routes, in which international media used a humanitarian and societal concern angle, while local media often used a conflict-oriented angle. With this idea, studies of news framing should also consider media priming and its effects on public opinion regarding ethnic minorities. Lastly, the framing of Papuans in Indonesia is also affected by limitations of self-representation due to censorship and legal prohibitions that minimise indepth and independent reporting as well as portrayals of Papuans in Indonesia (Mambor & da Costa Sarmiento, 2020).

### **Ethnic minorities**

Studies on media framing and public opinion towards ethnic minorities across the globe have focused on the existence of asylum-seekers and immigrants' lives in Western countries. Schemer (2013) found that asylum-seekers in Swiss media were framed through repetitive use of negative keywords and problem-oriented scenarios. Jacobsen et al. (2012) states that the continuous exposure of negative stereotyping in media affects public opinion about Muslims in Denmark. De Coninck et al. (2018) drew a similar conclusion with trust in the media as a factor. Lecheler et al. (2015) suggested that visual aspects in news narratives reinforced the building of a certain mental-image towards reports about ethnic minorities. Limited and biased coverage of ethnic minorities also contributes to the phenomena. Studies show that repetitive news reporting of crime and violence connected to ethnic minorities can build antagonistic images of marginalised groups (Allen & Bruce, 2017; Hannis, 2009).

Public opinion is often reinforced by news media framing, especially through repetition of a certain angle, theme, or the use of keywords. Adisa et al. (2016), who studied news framing of conflict among ethnic group leaders in Nigeria, argued that stereotyped and conflict-oriented frames reinforced and intensified the existing conflict and public views on the conflict. Similarly, Kanaker et al. (2020) claimed that conflict-oriented framing of the Rohingya crisis always highlighted the conflict and distracted people from finding a solution to the conflict.

Media priming and its effects on public opinion is also found in studies about racial representation of African American communities in media, including, but not limited to discourses of police brutality as well as the Black Lives Matter movement. Such studies show that media framing can build a sense of hostility towards African American communities through repetition of negative image-building (Kulaszewics, 2016; Lane et al., 2020). In the same context, a study by Fridkin et al. (2017) showed that there is a tendency for media framing to oscillate between angles of sympathetic reporting which underlines human interest or the contrasting angle of establishing law and order through the perspective of authorities.

### Theoretical frameworks

Public opinion is understood to be a result of framing presented in the media to reflect the zeitgeist of the times. This creates a feedback loop and reinforces pre-existing beliefs among the public (Petersen, 2019). As a reflection and contributor to public opinion, news framing may build an image of reality, affecting the views of public on a large scale (Lasswell, 1922; Nwabueze & Okonkwo, 2018).

Berger and Luckmann's Social Construction of Reality theory (1965) argues that people's cognition and behaviour are shaped by external and internal stimuli which simultaneously construct their views about the world. They argued that people's opinion about reality are built by 'internalising the external' so that beliefs are shaped by external stimuli. Another way individuals construct their reality is by 'forming objectivity' in which they create a standpoint about a phenomenon (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Lastly, they argue that people express their beliefs and opinions as the results of a negotiation with the two previous stages, in a stage called 'externalising the internal.' Arguably, the construction of reality is driven by how people deal with obtained information and other factors such as the difference between individual and societal framing, and pre-existing beliefs (de Vreese, 2005), as well as inherent themes presented by news narratives (Valkenburg et al., 1999).

### Methodology

Drawing from previous studies on media framing and public opinion, this research employed a qualitative approach using focus group discussion to collect data from multiple sources simultaneously (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Purposive sampling was used to choose participants through an online recruitment process which included inquiry on existing patterns of media consumption habits as well as familiarity with *Kompas*, *Jubi* and the 2019 Asrama Papua incident. The participants of the study consisted of two groups of eight people selected from the digital native generation; that is, people born between 1993 and 2001. This selection of participants corresponded to previous studies which suggested that young people were more familiar with—and more critical of—digital media (Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017; Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

Conducted in two different sessions, the focus group discussion began with the distribution of a consent form to the participants. They were also briefed about the study aim and given an option to use pseudonyms in the research report. They were given supplementary articles about the Asrama Papua incident (Putri, 2020). These articles included a selection of *Kompas* articles; Papuan student dormitory in Surabaya visited by hundreds of mass organisations; This is the presumed cause; Facts on the clash at the Papuan student dormitory, Presumed to have defamed the national flag and 43 were seized; Khofifah and the governor of Papua rejected from entering the Papuan student dormitory in

Surabaya. The selected *Jubi* articles were Papuan student dormitory in Surabaya visited by officials and mass organisations; Damages done to the Papuan student dormitory in Surabaya are recorded; Parents' visit rejected by students of the Papuan dormitory in Surabaya.

Answers from the discussions were transcribed and analysed through a thematic analysis approach to deduce the perception of the participants towards the differences of framing between *Kompas* and *Jubi*. This analysis was interpreted in the contexts of Social Construction of Reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and with the guidance of notions related to journalism, news framing, and public opinion.

### Perceptions of Papuans

In understanding how digital natives constructed social reality about Papuan as a minority group in Indonesia based on news framing, this study assessed their pre-existing beliefs to contextualise their perceptions.

Participants were asked to describe pre-existing perception about Papuans prior to being exposed to the news. This identified that lack of familiarity towards Papuans was one of the major factors contributing to the construction of stereotypical profiling about the minority group. Limited stories about Papuans that they learned at school and lack of media representation reinforced stereotypical and racial profiling of Papuans in Indonesia:

I just know nothing. This unknown feeling is what causes a lot of people to have these negative stereotypes about Papuan people. (A, 23)

When they live in Jakarta or the neighbouring towns, they become kind of an outcast because of people perceiving them as a minority. And [therefore], some people don't know how to act around them. (L, 20)

When I was in school, what I gathered is that Papua is a part of Indonesia, but very discriminated against. (Y, 23)

Aside from lack of familiarity, limited media exposure about Papuans further eroded their view about the ethnic group and they were most likely to believe the narratives about Papuans in media. Stories constantly referred to Papuans being involved in crime, violence, or political conflicts (Rubawati, 2018):

There are a lot of conflicts between the state and the people. And historically, there a lot of conflicts between the local citizens and the state [Indonesia] to gain control of Papua [the region]. (S, 23)

... the region of Papua that I know was freed in the 60s. And we freed Irian Jaya and gave them freedom from the Dutch. But now I realise it's becoming more apparent that Papua was annexed by NKRI [Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia] and the residents have become subjects to colonialism. (B, 22)

This is something that I have heard; words like ‘separatists’ is one of the few that I heard quite often. Those words really do stick. (H, 23)

I know so little. Aside from when they’re in the news. But when they’re in the news, it’s always negative; the riots, the Asrama conflict. If you don’t look for it, you can’t really see that it’s there. (H, 22)

This study also showed that digital natives have grown to perceive Papuans as foreign and inferior to most Indonesians. However, the ubiquitous presence of alternative sources of information in the digital age provides them with diverse images about the minority groups. Yet, the association of negative characters with the Papuan ethnic group remains substantial. As such, the study participants saw Papuans as primitive, uneducated, uneducated, under-developed and uncivilised:

Papua is a rich land, but it’s heavily exploited. Therefore, the infrastructure is not really developed. And the government also doesn’t seem to prioritise their attention towards Papua. (L, 20)

A lot of stereotypes portray their civilisation as primitive. ...there’s this sort of attribution to wilderness and being in the jungle ... or they speak quite loudly or smell. Those are things we attribute to animals, which is very demeaning. (B, 22)

...to differentiate their way there [Papua] and our way here in Jakarta is by the accent I guess the way [they are portrayed] in the media is exaggerated more than it’s supposed to be. I guess that’s their way of differentiating. (I, 23)

I think that stereotype [prone to violence] is basically because we know that there are a lot of tribes in that region that are still prone to violence, tribalism. But that’s still a stereotypical thing to say for generalising the past of a culture. (Y, 22)

Negative perceptions about Papuans are also associated with physical characteristics such as darker skin color, curly hair and thick lips that are always seen as negative traits. These physical traits are often associated with other social attributes such as lack of education, low comprehensive skills, and limited financial security, which construct a lower social status. The worst scene is people and authorities tend to use violence in dealing with social frictions involving Papuans. However, these stereotypes brought participants to awareness of internalised racism, especially after they were exposed to stories about the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States:

What I heard about stereotypes about Papuans, they are outcast? In my own mind right now, I just feel like every time we talk about Papuans; they are less educated. And economically, they earn less than what we can earn. (R, 22)

... my experience so far has mostly been about their appearance and

sometimes their intelligence. It reminds me of how whites treated African American back then. How they look at black people as inferior. but that's the stereotype I see; of being stinky or dumb or just less capable. (A, 23)

I really agree with most of the previous comments on internalised racism and the way we see Papuans as not dissimilar to how [white people] see African Americans in the US back in the days. (B, 22)

It's nothing new to hear these sorts of stereotypes about Papuans, especially since they're rather dark skinned, but I guess it's more towards our internalised racism. (S, 24)

There is a perception that Papuans are rude, smelly, that they have no water and electricity. I have also heard that they lack intelligence, I have never heard of positive first impressions on Papuans. (W, 23)

In brief, this discussion provided understanding about digital natives' pre-existing views towards Papuans which showed that people went through the process of internalising the external in responding to negative images about Papuans in media. The negative images about the minority group were constructed due to lack of social contact with the ethnic group, limited news coverage about the group and the constant exposure to internalised racism against Papuans built by social institutions. Such a process of internalising the external corresponds to the theoretical notion of Social Construction of Reality as proposed by (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

### Visual and textual news framing

In the focus group discussion, all the participants were asked to describe noticeable discrepancies between the articles from *Kompas* and *Jubi*. This process included identifying textual and visual factors of framing and the inherent thematic structure. Analysing their feedback showed the participants paid attention to several aspects, perspective of reporting, script structure, depth of reporting, scale of media institution, angle of reporting (antagonisation vs sympathy), and focal point of reporting (conflict-oriented vs human interest). They perceived *Kompas* as using a limited, surface-level and general approach in its reporting, in contrast to the in-depth and personal narrative provided by *Jubi*:

I did feel like when I read *Jubi* it's much more personal. They gave us better context to the events while *Kompas* was much more impartial; 'here is what we think happened, this is what we got. (A, 23)

I think externally, *Kompas* did not explore the core of the problem enough. Whereas *Jubi*, seem[ed] to be determined enough that they included several conversations of the residents here [student dormitory]. (H, 23)

*Kompas'* piece would be very neutral. Depicting both sides of the story is the most ethical, journalistic wise. While *Jubi* articles are really personal, up close, in a way kind of dramatised. (H, 22)



*Kompas* wants to uphold more factual standards, but at the same time there's a narrative that's missing. (V, 22)

Talking further about depth of reporting, participants deemed *Kompas* as being more representative of an Indonesian view as a national media outlet. In contrast, they saw *Jubi* to be more representative of the Papuan students' perspective due to the in-depth narrative. They identified the difference in depth of reporting between the two media in terms of scale and scope of the reportage:

Ever since the persecution and racist incident that occurred to them ... that context and admission that the incident is of persecution and racism. You don't see that in *Kompas*, only in *Jubi*. So they [*Jubi*] really showed that it was a racist act. (B, 22)

In the second article *Jubi* mentioned that there were several—four students—[who] were injured and I think that's a huge fact. But, they didn't mention that at all in *Kompas*. But *Kompas* did mention that arrests were made.' (A, 23)

...they also went to the extent of including a trauma column towards the end of the article, why they rejected the Governor's visitation. *Kompas* could have included the other's [Papuan students] perspectives. (H, 23)

There's a specific column of trauma in the last section, they highlight that because they wanted the audience to see that the victims here [Papuan students] are not the ones that need to be blamed. (R, 22)

The participants' could sense that *Kompas* tried to highlight the allegation against Papuans who were reported as desecrating the national flag. Participants also perceived the constant reiteration of the allegation by *Kompas* as a form of justification for the attacks. Some of them even perceived the tone to be accusatory against the students. Contrastingly, they perceive articles by *Jubi* as the counter-perspective in which Papuan students were not framed as a threat, but as victims of racial discrimination, hate crimes and police brutality. Such perceptions validate Putri's (2020) contention that *Kompas* focused on a conflict-oriented lens while *Jubi* wrote from a human-interest angle:

As if implying that something happened first and then because the Papuans did something they were attacked. In the second folder, there's more focus on the *Kompas* headline regarding the allegation of the flag's desecration. 'Below are the complete facts', but the next line is 'the students have allegedly' ... I think this is weird, they say these are the facts, but the number one point is an allegation. (B, 22)

The keyword alleged is not valid to accuse that they broke the flag. It's not clear, but *Kompas*, they also make it seem like it's factual. (I, 22)

*Kompas*, in the allegation part. Because if their standpoint [it] is neutral, I don't think the word allegations are necessary to me, I don't think



it should even be the suitable headline. (H, 23)

*Kompas* really highlighted the damaged flag and they only just brought up the student arrests in the second one [article] and on the bottom part. ...I think *Kompas* can be seen as subjective in their lexical choices. (L, 20)

...because they think that the Papuans have broken the flag and that would threaten the NKRI value [nationalist sentiment about the unity of the republic]. But it's just ego. And we've been taught to internalise that NKRI is above everything. (Y, 22)

The students saw *Jubi*'s style of news reporting as ideal for diluting existing racial stereotypes of Papuans. They saw its promotion of the Papuan students' perspectives, as well as choosing unbiased keywords, sources, and tags as displaying socially responsible journalism:

*Jubi* also has these hashtags such as discrimination, horizontal conflict, *ormas* [mass organisations] racism and Papuan Lives Matter. That makes the article feel more personal to their side of the story. (Y, 23)

It's so much more sentimental from *Jubi*'s side. I read the third article and the writing is sentimental. While *Kompas* stayed factual. I guess because they're the bigger media compared to *Jubi*. (A, 23)

...but you can see that *Kompas*'s reporters are really playing with the angle. Whereas *Jubi*, they really want to give more perspective of the victims. (AT, 23)

...I guess this is where *Jubi* can elaborate from the subjective, yet positive side. Because the reporters are Papuans, they can relate and understand their [students] position. (H, 23)

These apparent differences in thematic structures are also attributed to the difference in script structures. They identify that *Kompas* maintains the traditional who/what/where/when/why/how in building news stories with more highlight in 'how', showing the narratives of the allegation. In contrast, the participants note that *Jubi*'s narrative-building is dominated by statements and quotations from the students:

*Kompas* do provide the full package in terms of the 5W1H. They have the chronological story; why it happened, and also when, where, and what. But for *Jubi*, I feel like they focus more on the victims, which is the Papuans and how it shapes this victim's side [of the story]. (R, 22)

I notice that *Jubi* relies more on dialogue and statements from other people. Especially statements about the Papuans, instead of the *ormas* [mass organisations]. I think *Jubi*, in a way, is more one-sided than *Kompas*. But at the same time, *Jubi* also provides more specific statements that would not be available in *Kompas*. (V, 22)

Apart from being sensitive towards the tone, angle and depth of reporting as a way of objectifying reality about Papuan in the news, the participants also examined the visuals used in the news as part of the framing device. They perceived images as signifiers of both perspective and the focal point in reporting that could strengthen the frame built by both media. In their opinion, *Jubi* provided factual images of the Papuan students' lives from the inside, while *Kompas* presented images of the riot:

*Kompas* is for the general public view of the incident itself, but *Jubi*, through the articles and pictures, invokes sympathy towards the students in the dormitory, as they were discriminated against by the police and people in the region. (I, 23)

*Kompas*' visual style seems like they are trying to distance themselves. Whereas *Jubi*'s were exactly from within the gate. As if these indicate that *Jubi* understands more about their [Papuan students'] position as the intimidated. (H, 23)

*Jubi*, with their use of photo, seems to emphasise that they are more representative of the Papuans [in the incident]. (HR, 23)

I agree that *Jubi* was portrayed as though it was taken from the victim's side, whereas *Kompas*, it's not necessarily neutral but just a reporter's picture of news in general. (AT, 23)

They [*Kompas*] also provide pictures of the police trying to break into the dormitory, pointing their guns towards the dormitory; they want to portray the perspectives that the students can be dangerous and so we have to be careful. (R, 23)

In line with the textual content, *Jubi*'s visual aids were representative of the insider's perspective. This aspect was found to be a contributing factor in setting the narrative of *Jubi*'s article to be a more indepth reporting of the incident which underlines the theme of human interest.

### **Externalising the internal**

As noted earlier, another process that news readers go through in building a social construct of reality about certain images in media is by externalising the internal (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The results show that constant exposure to racially-biased content increases scepticism towards the media. Their critical viewpoint revolves around the societal issues that media write about ethnic minorities, religions and marginalised groups. Even though they still have trust in *Kompas* as a mainstream news outlet in Indonesia, they doubt the accuracy of the news stories. This group of digital natives has diversified media consumption habits and assumes that traditional media plays a lesser role in building public opinion as compared to new media:

I don't really trust the media when it's about ethnic minorities, because usually they're oppressed, they're discriminated against. (A, 23)

Unfortunately people got apprehended by the police because of these Papuans and again because of their stereotypes and then the racial discrimination, they must have did it. (I, 22)

Fundamentally, Indonesians have a very mob mentality—especially when it comes to their nationality and patriotism—which can really be dangerous, especially in situations such as these. (H, 22)

...But then they're forgetting that these Papuans are also experiencing racist influence because of that ...because the stereotypes had already existed. And the incident just reinforces that. (V, 22)

Despite the scepticism, participants considered that subtle framing could imply negative connotations towards ethnic minorities, reinforcing existing ethnic stereotypes. Existing negative stereotypes towards Papuans may remain apparent in national media like *Kompas*, but indepth coverage by a local publication like *Jubi* appears to be effective in eliminating stereotypical and racial profiling. Moreover, as digital-literate individuals, the participants urged both traditional and new media to be more transparent in reporting on minority groups:

Most media are still trying to be so politically correct, [so] they hide some truth or some information that could be important for the people to know. (V, 22)

The minority deserve their justice too, sometimes media report an incident wrongly or phrase it in the wrong context so it's not true to the reality. (L, 20)

Be more transparent and elaborative. Because, yes, the minority needs their justice. And also, for news media, especially, to do more research and [instill] more compassion for what they write. (Y, 22)

## Conclusion

Previous literature (Allen & Bruce, 2017; De Coninck et al., 2018; Jacobsen et al., 2012; Lecheler et al., 2015; Schemer, 2013) suggest that media framing affects people's perceptions about social issues and subsequently builds biased public opinion about minority groups. The findings of this study show that news framing is capable of building social constructions of reality through constant images of selected reality. The discussion of digital natives' perception towards news framing of the 2019's Asrama Papua incident offers an example of how media influence their views about a minority group and reinforces racial stereotypes. In fact, the social construction of reality about Papua is forged by a lack of social contact with the ethnic group, limited news coverage about the group and constant exposure to internalised racism against Papuans built by social institutions. Participants were aware that media built biased frames

about minority groups. They paid attention to perspectives of reporting, depth of reporting, scale of media institution, angles of reporting and focal points of reporting to identify the media frames.

Though trust in the media is declining and being replaced with skepticism among digital natives, they find that repetitive media reports contribute to the shaping of public opinion. To deal with repetitive biased media reports, they want media to use a personal and indepth approach to reporting sensitive issues on Papua or other marginalised groups to negate hostility and racial stereotyping. Simultaneously, the sense of distrust breeds a demand for current Indonesian mainstream media to be more transparent and equal in constructing news narratives.

This study has offered a critical analysis of the correlation between news framing and public opinion, highlighting that social constructs of reality should be considered in understanding how they shape their opinion. However, this research only presents the view of a small group through focus group discussion. Further research is needed to measure public perceptions about news framing in a wider scale.

We recommend that media and journalism institutions should devise a more equal approach in reporting incidents regarding ethnic minorities. In-depth representations and sources could be a solution to racial disparities in the media. It is also recommended that further studies diversify the scope of media and participants to truly discern susceptibility to media framing and media literacy in order to construct a more objective and equal journalistic landscape in Indonesia.

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