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R. Barthes's Semiotic Approach to Media Reports: Indonesian Case

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Abstract. The study of semiotics is closely related to the reader's interpretation of the text. Narrative is our fundamental means of comprehension and expression for this time-locked condition. Any semiological system is a system of meanings, but the consumer of myths takes meaning for a system of facts. The purpose of this study is to use R. Barthes's semiotic analysis to study the process of news consumption that causes negative perceptions of government policies by recipients. The research concept uses critical media theories to view news with negative connotations as leading to panic, making people more marginalized in meeting their daily needs. According to R. Barthes, all cultural phenomena, like types of communication, are encoded in sign systems, which are the product of myth-making activity, where any culturally significant phenomenon is a speech utterance that is the carrier of a mythical message. The subject of the study is an emergent discourse in which there is a "meaning effect" for Indonesian audiences located on dozens of islands, affecting their core interests. Previous studies support this research. The unit of analysis is news regarding the policy of increasing gasoline prices in the largest Muslim country with 300 million population in the both national and local media in 2022–2023. The results of Barthes's semiotic analysis of the signifier show that people are becoming more marginalized as the results of increasing petrol price policy. Signified without the approval of the people's representative institutions, petrol prices continued to increase. The denotative sign for policy makers to increase gasoline directly increases the price of gasoline, which makes it more difficult for people to engage in economic activities. The connotative signifier in the title and content of the news has a very detrimental effect on people when purchasing petrol. The connotative sign means that the news can annoy the people because of the increase in petrol prices to run their economy. On the other side the government's advice is to listen to institutions like media that represent the people and get involved in units that communicate directly with the people.

Keywords: semiotics Roland Barthes, encoding or decoding messages, semiotic analysis, connotative signifier, semic code, marginalized society

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Семиотический подход Р. Барта к сообщениям СМИ: индонезийский кейс

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Аннотация. Изучение семиотики тесно связано с интерпретацией текста адресатом. Повествование — основное средство понимания и выражения этого состояния, ограниченного временем. Любая семиологическая система есть система значимостей, но реципиент мифа принимает значение за систему фактов. Целью работы является применение семиотического анализа Р. Барта для исследования процесса получения новостных сообщений, вызывающих негативное восприятие адресатами реализуемой правительством политики. В концепции исследования используются критические теории СМИ, рассматривающие новости с негативными коннотациями, приводящие к паническим настроениям, что делает людей более маргинализированными в удовлетворении своих повседневных потребностей. Согласно Р. Барту, культурные феномены, как и виды коммуникации, кодируются в знаковых системах, которые являются продуктом мифотворческой деятельности, где любое культурно значимое явление представляет собой речевое высказывание, являющееся носителем мифического сообщения. Предметом исследования является дискурс, в котором присутствует «эффект значимости», и затрагивающий базовые интересы индонезийской аудитории, расположенной на десятках островов. Предшествующие исследования, в которых единицей анализа являлись новости о повышении цен на топливо в национальных и местных СМИ в 2022—2023 гг. в крупнейшей мусульманской стране с 300-миллионным населением, подтверждают наши выводы. Результаты семиотического анализа означющего, проведенного благодаря методике Р. Барта, показывают, что индонезийцы становятся все более маргинализированными в результате интерпретации, затрудняющей участие людей в экономической деятельности. Коннотативное значение в названии и содержании новости пагубно влияет на поведение при покупке топлива. Коннотативный знак демонстрирует тот факт, что новости могут раздражать людей из-за роста цен на бензин, который является необходимым условием для поддержания их экономиче-

ской деятельности. С другой стороны, правительство советует прислушиваться к сигналам, исходящим от медиа как институтов, представляющих народ, и коммуницировать со структурами, напрямую работающими с населением.

Ключевые слова: семиотика Ролана Барта, кодирование или декодирование сообщений, семиотический анализ, коннотативное означающее, семикод, маргинализованное общество

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Introduction

Connotation is intended to express emotional or evaluative shades of a statement and reflects the cultural traditions of a society, representing a type of pragmatic information that reflects not the objects and phenomena themselves, but a certain attitude towards them. The French scientist R. Barthes approaches the problem of the origin and essence of myth from the point of view of connotative semiology, which studies sign systems of any type of social practice in the aspect of latent meanings that cannot be directly actualized in the minds of perceivers in the process of communication, but require decoding or “reading”. Barthes considers myth as a semiological system, turning to the well-known model of the sign of Saussure, who identified three main elements in it: the signifier, the signified, and the sign itself, which acts as a result of the association of the first two elements. According to Barthes, in myth the same three-element system is framed, however, its specificity is that myth is a secondary semiological system built on top of the first language system or language-object.

Developing countries like Indonesia still need cheap fuel to support development in every sector. The news about need for gasoline in Indonesia is very high and gasoline prices jump in Indonesia is of great interest. The government reported that the price of pertalite¹ and diesel will experience an increase in prices starting on September 1 2022. Regarding this, the Minister of Energy and Mineral

¹ Pertalite is a 90 octane gasoline that provides an interim solution for consumers currently using Premium

Resources Arifin Tasrif has given a signal that on August 31 2022 the government will announce an increase in subsidized fuel for pertalite and diesel. Apart from that, *the prices of pertalite and diesel which will soon rise is part of the government's plan to provide subsidies for the community*².

According to the Minister of Finance Sri Mulyana, there are two additional social assistances that will be distributed to the public in the subsidies that have been prepared by the government. The government distributed a fuel subsidy budget of Rp. 9.6 trillion for the worker social assistance program. So that the total social assistance from the transfer of fuel subsidies of IDR (Indonesian rupiah) 24.17 trillion will be distributed and it is hoped that it will reduce people's difficulties and also poverty in facing life amidst rising fuel prices. Apart from that, the Ministry of Finance also provides transportation subsidies for public transportation including online motorcycle taxis and also fishermen in line with the increase in fuel, *which is taken from the general allocation fund (DAU) and profit sharing funds*³.

*On September 8, 2023, the price of crude oil increased further and remained at the level of US\$ 90 per barrel. The increasing price of crude oil has decided that Saudi Arabia will reduce oil production by up to 9 million barrels per day. Not only Saudi Arabia, Russia will also extend its voluntary reduction of 300,000 until December and ban gasoline exports throughout the world except for four countries in the former Soviet Union to stabilize the domestic market. So it is predicted that the increase in fuel prices will have an impact on the new prices sold by PT. Pertamina. The increase in oil prices allows PT. Pertamina increase the price of certain types of non-subsidized fuel in October 2023*⁴.

The government itself has increased fuel prices based on the provisions of Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources Decree No. 19 K/10/MEM/2019 concerning the Basic Price Formula in Calculating Retail Selling Prices for Types of Fuel. The formula for this price uses the average published price of Mean of Platts Singapore (MOPS) which uses units of US\$/barrel. Apart from that, the increase in non-subsidized fuel prices can also be caused by the weakening of the rupiah exchange rate. In September 2023 the average value of the rupiah was recorded at IDR 15,349.21/US\$ 1, lower than August which was IDR. 15,240.65/US\$ 1, resulting in an increase in fuel prices. *There are four types of fuel that have experienced increases in fuel prices, namely, Pertamina, Dexlite, and also Pertamina Dex.*

² CNN Indonesia. (2022). *Siap — Siap Harga Pertalite Dan Solar Dikabarkan Naik Per 1 September*. URL: <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/ekonomi/20220830190953-85-841055/Siap-Siap-Harga-Pertalite-Dan-Solar-Dikabarkan-Naik-Per-1-September> (accessed: 20.12.2023).

³ CNN Indonesia. (2022). *Siap — Siap Harga Pertalite Dan Solar Dikabarkan Naik Per 1 September*. URL: <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/ekonomi/20220830190953-85-841055/Siap-Siap-Harga-Pertalite-Dan-Solar-Dikabarkan-Naik-Per-1-September> (accessed: 20.12.2023).

⁴ CNBC Indonesia. (2023). *Sinyal Kuat Harga Bbm Non-Subsidi Naik 1 Oktober*. URL: <https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/research/20230927154049-128-476082/Sinyal-Kuat-Harga-Bbm-Non-Subsidi-Naik-1-Oktober> (accessed: 20.12.2023).

The Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources is proposing regulations on purchasing pertalite. This regulatory plan is in line with the consequences of rising world oil prices. The conflict between Israel and Hamas has the potential to influence the increase in world oil prices. Not only that, the need for crude oil ahead of winter also increases so that crude oil prices experience an increase which can affect fuel prices. With this, the government also proposes *to issue a revision of Presidential Regulation Number 191 of 2014 concerning reference regulations for the distribution of subsidized fuel so that it is right on target* [1].

The content of this revision is to regulate in more detail and examine the criteria for vehicles that can be filled by pertalite and to make differences in the price of pertalite according to the type of people's vehicles. So far, in an effort to implement this regulation, Pertamina is conducting trials on restrictions on purchasing pertalite for four-wheeled vehicles in various regions. And *every purchase is required to have a QR-code which will be scanned by the gas station officer before making the purchase* [1].

What is the research focus of the news analysis regarding the gasoline increase policy from Barthes' perspective? The aim of the research is to look at the process at the macro level of news analysis regarding the petrol increase policy seen from Barthes' semiotic analysis with his own unconventional terminology where the signifier is viewed from two angles: as the resulting element of the first linguistic system and as the initial element of the mythological system.

Definitions of Terms

Communication

Fiske defines communication as a form of social interaction conveyed through messages [2]. Message transmission is a process in which an individual's personality will influence the personality of other individuals through encoding messages or decoding messages. A new categorization of a sign in semiotics was presented by M.G. Shilina and M. Zarifian [3]. The transmission will focus on the act of communication. John Fiske put forward two main schools in communication studies, namely the "semiotic school" which is signs and also the "process school" which views communication as the transmission of messages. John Fiske's approach to semiotic studies is one that can be used in research [4].

Roland Barthes's Semiotics

In order to organize textual multiplicity, to make it at least to some extent accessible to analytical objectification, Barthes introduces the concept of code. According to semiotics expert Roland Barthes, the study of semiotics is related to the reader's interpretation. Barthes, [5] mapped the function of signs into six parts, namely markers, signs, denotative signs, connotative markers, connotative signs, and connotative signs. Thus, Roland Barthes' sign function can be applied

to help analyze news from a sign perspective [6]. Barthes believes that language is a sign system that reflects the assumptions of a certain society in a certain time period. Barthes' semiotic analysis is known as two stages of signs (order of signification), the first stage of identification as a relationship between signifier and signified in a sign outside reality. This stage is called the denotation stage where the meaning of the sign is the most obvious. Barthes also defines the second stage of significance as connotation. This is due to the interaction when the sign meets the reader's feelings and emotions as well as their cultural values [7].

Barthes also said that the signifier is the text and the signified is the context of the sign. Barthes emphasizes that myth performs various functions: it simultaneously designates and notifies, inspires and prescribes, and is motivating in nature. According to Barthes, myth does not hide its connotative meanings, it "naturalizes" them. Naturalization of a concept is the main function of myth. Semiotic analysis is a research method for interpreting the meaning of a communication or message, whether implicit or explicit. The intended meaning starts from partial meaning to comprehensive meaning so that the communicator's motives can be known [8]. The results of the analysis of a series of signs will describe the concept of thought conveyed by the communicator, and the series of signs are interpreted as answers to ideological questions and cultural values behind a text.

Social media

Social media is the internet service most popular with internet users today. The way social media works is more preferred than traditional media such as television, radio, newspapers and so on. The ease of interacting and spreading information is the attraction of social media [9].

R.M. Chebib and N. Sohail wrote that, social media is used to communicate by a number of people in society and consists of interactive websites, social news sites, social networking sites as well as photo, video, etc. sharing websites [10]. Social media allows users to do things such as interactivity, building networks, and providing information to other audiences [11]. According to Holton et al. 2016 [12] social media facilitates access to news, as well as providing opportunities to engage in the news process, through commenting, sharing and posting online

Government policy

Policy is an aspect of action that has a purpose that is passed by a number of individuals or someone to handle a problem [13]. The concept of a policy is to focus interests based on what is actually implemented, not what the government proposes [14].

Previous research on Roland Barthes' semiotics came from M. Muhammadiyah with the title "A Semiotic Analysis of Political News Featured in Indonesian Newspapers". This research aims to evaluate the application of semiotics in Indonesian news articles relating to the election

of Candidates for Governor and Deputy Governor in South Sulawesi for the period 2013–2018. This research uses semiotic analysis methods, and the results of the research. It shows that the application of semiotics in newspaper articles related to election campaigns only highlights the struggles of political actors by providing imagery to build public attention by participating in media coverage to be elected as future leaders.

Furthermore, there is an outstanding research regarding semiotics entitled *The Ideology of Racism in Contemporary Hollywood Films on Netflix: A Case Study on “All the Boys I’ve Loved Before” Movie* [4]. The aim of this research is to analyze the ideology of racism in Hollywood films broadcast on Netflix. “To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before” is a film based on the “New York Times” best seller novel. This research applies a qualitative text analysis method, namely the Semiotics method. This film is analyzed through Roland Barthes’ semiotic analysis, which is known for its denotative, connotative and mythical meaning. The results of this research show that the use of Asian faces as the main character and protagonist in “To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before” shows that the racism depicted in this film is a myth.

Methods

This study uses Roland Barthes’s discourse research strategy. Myth feeds the consciousness of people living in the world of material values. Barthes’s theoretical research played an outstanding role in revealing the semiological nature of myth, the “mystery” of its origin and functioning. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different, even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Barthes calls the signifier meaning, in terms of myth — form. The signified of a mythological system is called a concept, which represents the meaning. This is due, according to Barthes, to the fact that the expression sign is ambiguous, since the signifier of the myth is already formed from the signs of language. According to Barthes, meaning or myth itself is created due to the deformation of the relationship between concept and meaning as the very form of myth is formed by linguistic meaning, subordinate to the concept. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself. Researcher V. Savitsky described correlation of the main functions of language [15], emblems are the object of semiotic analysis presented in a number of articles as well [16]. As to Barthes the myth performs various functions: it simultaneously designates and notifies, inspires and prescribes, and is motivating in nature. Addressing his audience, it imposes its own intentions on addressee. One of Barthes’s most outstanding works, “*Mythologies*” [17], was conceived as a series of revealing essays on the mystified consciousness of mass society. According to the researcher, semiology should serve to destroy the dominant ideological languages and perform a critical function.

There are several articles in our focus regarding government policy about the increase of gasoline prices during 2022–2023 in Indonesia. The research is done at the micro level. The validity of the data uses triangulation in this research. The coding used is open coding.

Results

The results of the research stated that at the micro level of the DC mass media text, the signifier for the policy of increasing petrol in Indonesia was “scary”. The significance of this text for society is a frightening sign. In denotative signs as well as connotative markers, the title and content of mass media text news have a frightening meaning for the public. Because it can cause price increases in various aspects of people’s lives. We use narrative to describe on a personal level who we are, where we have been, and where we are going: our life stories — to ourselves and to other people [18. P. 283].

At the first level, connotation is the first level, while connotation is the second level. Denotation is more associated with closure of meaning and censorship or political repression.

Table 2

Analyzing Roland Barthes’s Map of Signs

Marker / Signifier Soaring oil prices have caused the prices of pertalite and diesel in Indonesia to increase	Signed/Signified Scary/terrifying/creepy
Denotative sign The increase in fuel prices in Indonesia makes it more difficult for people and increases people’s poverty, because increasing fuel prices also causes price increases in various aspects, such as food.	
Connotative Signifier The trial regulations limiting the purchase of pertalite for 4-wheeled vehicles in various regions affect losses in purchasing this gasoline.	Connotative Signified The transfer of subsidies will be distributed and is expected to reduce people’s hardship and poverty in facing the economy amidst rising fuel prices
Connotative Sign The news about the increase in fuel prices made people angry in running the people’s economy.	

Source: compiled by the authors

In the table of signifier results of this research, the soaring price of oil has caused the price of pertalite and diesel in Indonesia to increase with scary/terrifying significance, which means that the fuel increase policy causes the prices of other necessities to also increase, which can increase poverty and hardship in the community, making the news frightening. When linked to previous research from Vercia Muhammad on the results of the signifier, namely, Jaguar brand cars are made in England with the signified luxury/style, because these luxury and stylish cars are made in England with high quality

like Jaguar cars [19]. The results of other research related to Barthes' analysis are entitled "An Alternative Approach for Personal Narrative Interpretation: The Semiotics of Roland Barthes" [20].

The results of this research use analysis based on Barthes' five codes, namely the hermeneutic code this makes it possible to trace the transition experienced by the narrator from a firm approach to an approach where the narrator asks questions and examines possible alternatives due to the situation of finding oneself. The semic code in this study allows tracking the narrator's transition from rescue status and dealing with isolated cases and focusing on personal problems. Then the symbolic code allows for signs of changes experienced by the narrator with subjective feelings towards the surrounding environment. Furthermore, the results of the proairetic code analysis make it possible to reveal the dialogue that occurs between the states of destruction and creation by identifying the dominant verb in the narrative. Lastly, namely the cultural code in this research, the cultural code makes it possible to trace the transition experienced by the narrator from a situation of gaining power through personal ties to gaining professional knowledge power [21].

That policy is a process that has certain goals to be followed and implemented by a person or group of actors to solve certain problems. The essence of a policy is a guideline for action, which may be simple or complex, general or specific to achieve certain goals. As explained above, policies can be carried out individually or in general, and in fact policies are more often implemented and used in government and state actions or behavior which are better known as state policies or public policies.

In the news text, the Government distributed a transfer of the fuel subsidy budget of IDR 9.6 trillion for the worker social assistance program. So that the total social assistance from the transfer of fuel subsidies of IDR 24.17 trillion will be distributed and it is hoped that it will reduce people's difficulties and also poverty in facing life amidst rising fuel prices. In this text, the government distributes social assistance to the poor as a government policy to reduce people's difficulties due to the increase in fuel prices, so this shows the marginalization of society. Marginalized society is a society that is unable to adapt and involve itself with this increase in fuel prices. These marginalized or marginalized communities are considered to be powerless compared to other communities [22].

The selection of events, the relative importance attached to each, and the way in which subjective time is managed are all entirely dependent upon the point of view of the narrator. A narrative is a re-presentation of reality from a particular perspective. According to Yu.M. Lotman, semiotics should be understood as the science of communication systems and signs used in the process of communication [23]. Like all narratives they are selective though somehow related to planning and problem solving. It is a whole, an internally consistent, self-contained unit of expression; reality reconfigured in order to create meaning. From the news on the mass media, this fuel increase has caused controversy and

unrest in society, especially the lower class because this fuel increase will burden their activities. This increase in fuel has a very bad impact on class society, because, due to the increase in fuel prices, the prices of goods and services such as making bread and other goods will also increase along with the increase in fuel prices. Not only that, the increase in prices of basic commodities has resulted in rapid inflation. This inflation is an increase in commodity prices in general due to a mismatch between people's income levels and commodity procurement systems such as production, pricing, money issuance, and others [24]. Therefore, this is what makes society, especially the lower class, anxious, afraid and marginalized by the policy of increasing fuel prices.

Conclusions

According to R. Barthes, the “reading” of a myth is instantaneous, since it produces an immediate effect, which is much stronger than any rational explanations that can refute it later. Narrative is often implicated in the functioning of memory. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances — as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. Barth's innovation lies in the fact that he gave a semiological interpretation of ideology: he tried to consider ideology as a special sign formation. The psychological weighting of time is itself reciprocally related to the processes of event selection and event sequencing. A provided analysis based on Barthes' five codes like the hermeneutic one for tracing the transition experienced by the narrator from a firm approach with questions examining possible alternatives as well as the semic and symbolic cods which allows tracking the narrator's transition and detects signs of changes experienced by the narrator with subjective feelings towards the surrounding environment, while the proairetic code analysis reveal the dialogue between the states of destruction and creation and the cultural code traces the transition experienced by the narrator from a situation of gaining power through personal ties to gaining professional knowledge. Connotative meanings are suggestive, uncertain, vague, and therefore their decoding always involves a significant amount of subjectivity; one can be sure of the real presence of such meanings only if they are clearly redundant. Ordinary language, according to Barthes, is most often “abducted” by myth, since it itself contains the prerequisites for mythologization as a sign mechanism designed to manifest the speaker's intentions, what is called the expressiveness of language.

The results of the research at the first level mean that the mass news text makes people scary because gasoline is a tool in community development in terms of economics and community infrastructure development. At the second level, the information myth about the increase in petrol makes the public a sign that there will be an increase in prices in all aspects of life. As it seen the appeal to latent signifieds of connotative sign systems is associated with an attempt

to reorient semiology towards identifying meanings and meanings that are directly unconscious to people, mechanisms for manipulating people's consciousness in information society.

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