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Symbolic Interaction in Reading Hoaxes About Covid-19 Shared on Social Media

Burhanuddin Arafah[1],[*] Muhammad Hasyim[2]

[1] *Hasanuddin University*
[2] *Hasanuddin University*
[*]Corresponding author. Email: burhan-arafah@unhas.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Digital media (internet) has changed human behaviour in accessing information. Digital media (*smartphone,* tablet dan Notebook) help people to get information about current issues within a relatively short time. The development of information technology nowadays making internet users publishers, besides receive information, also create their information (news), giving comments and spreading it. The users' freedom in spreading such information may cause a disturbance in society. The major issue is how internet users can distinguish hoax and real information. This paper aims to explore the dissemination of the latest news on social media. The data was sourced from texts in social media and results of online questionnaires. The approach used in this research was semiotics. The research findings showed that the internet is a gateway to information and the most used media to access information is social media. Social media becomes a medium in the dissemination of hoaxes and the most dominant hoaxes found there is related to Covid 19. Reading hoaxes may produce the meaning of linguistic messages, informational messages that can be understood literally and connotative messages, symbolic interaction, which produce universal meaning on the fake news in society.

Keywords: social media, hoaxes, Covid-19, semiotics, symbolic interaction

1. INTRODUCTION

The appearance of internet technology in the 1960s, this technology has become the most important communication medium in all human activities in the world. The wide range, broadband and unlimited communication network enable people to communicate with others in different countries. The language barrier is no longer a problem with the availability of translation applications in translating many different languages.

Internet as the modern information technology has significantly increased its users year by year. The internet users in Indonesia has reached half of the total population. In 2020, the number has reached 196.7 million out of the total population of Indonesia of 272.1 million people (https://apjii.or.id/). It is increased by 8.9% (23.5 million) compared to 2018 (https://www.bps.go.id). Of the total internet users, the highest number of users are on social media, amounting to 160 million people. The most popular social media used to communicate is WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and TikTok. The data shows that the average number of hours spent accessing social media is 3.26 hours per day and 99% of internet users used their phones (Jayani, 2020).

The ease of Indonesians in accessing information in internet media, especially social media, may arise different problems. The problem that can occur is trustworthy information of the current issues received by users. The dissemination of information received related to the message reading (meaning), can lead to misunderstanding and perceive the information as reality (truth). The dissemination of information is an act of social interaction involving sender and receiver. According to West &Turner (2010), the dissemination of information is a symbolic interaction process (verbal and non-verbal communication) in constructing

meaning, thus it produces the purpose of communication. The dissemination of successful information is determined by the vital role of social media as a gateway to information. The dissemination of information is intended to give knowledge and understanding to the information delivered.

However, the dissemination of information can be fake, misguided and dangerous and society tend to think it as real (Rahmat & Areni, 2019; Juditha, 2020) and messages shared in social media to influence users' emotion (Tchakounté et al., 2020). Hoax is information shared to damage public trust in groups, organizations, government, products, services or certain people (Park & Rim, 2019). Hoax is generally designed by individuals or groups to secretly spread misleading information to achieve various purposes. Hoax producers often use conspiracy theories, by delivering messages to justify their activities or to attract people's attention and how people justify their statements. (Veil et al., 2012).

Hoax spread on social media has become a global issue. Based on the survey conducted by Mastel (2019), as many as 44.3% of 1.146 respondents receive hoax news every day and 17,2% of them receive more than one per day. The result of this research is also supported by Tchakounté (2020), revealing that as many as 59% of internet users communicate using hoaxes. Users get a lot of hoax news from social media.

The positive and negative impacts of hoax information depend on the translation of a sign (meaning of the message) by internet users. Translation of a sign by internet users is an ability to understand and use information from various digital sources through the sign (verbal and non-verbal). Reading hoax information is an ability to read and understand the meaning of a message through symbolic interaction which may produce literal meaning (informative) and connotative meaning (Barthes, 1957). Informative meaning or called denotative is the words' main meaning (literally) and connotative meaning may be influenced by ideology or the interest of hoax producers.

Hoax is the message, build by several components, namely the source of hoax sender, transmission and receiver channels. The source of hoax sender is individuals or groups who manipulate information that they think is right by giving attractive titles, images that reinforce the message and comments with persuasive language. Transmission channels are digital media used for disseminating hoaxes, such as social media. Furthermore, receivers (readers) are the internet users, anyone, as long as they access information online.

Hoax contains a linguistic message (denotative) and connotative (Barthes, 1977). A linguistic message is an informational message in the form of verbal texts and graphic images or videos, presenting all information absorbed from setting, code (language), character, contact or relation that happened between actors in the graphic images and videos. Linguistic message deals with communication matter and the initial process of symbolic interaction (code) between message (journalists) and receiver (media users). The connotative message is symbolic meanings contain in the linguistic message (Hasyim et al., 2019). The receiver uses referential symbols either in the form of verbal language or graphic images and videos. The referential symbols refer to something else (goal) that the sender wants to achieve.

Message reading (linguistic and connotative) produce a layer of meaning for readers (media users). The first layer is an informational message that understands literally. The second layer is message understood following the ideology of message makers. This is the target message. The readers interpret the message based on the purposes (ideology) of the senders. The third layer is meaning refers to other things which are not following the senders' intention. This layer produces new meaning. And the fourth layer is the message which does not affect (meaning) for readers. The fourth layer is critical receivers (media users) of the received messages.

The research problem which is interested to examine is the dissemination of hoax information as current issues in social media, and symbolic interaction by media users on message reading of hoax information. This paper used the semiotics approach to answer the research questions.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This paper used the descriptive method to represent the characters of the phenomenon being studied and the main focus of this research was to explain the research object to answer the phenomenon that occurred (Hasyim et al., 2021).

The data collection technique used was the observation method (Arafah & Hasyim, 2019) by tracking data record events or current issues on social media and online news media and online questionnaires distributed to the media users (WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook). The characteristics of social media are all users can become journalists to write news (information), and become publishers to report information that has been written and shared the existing news to others. In addition, social media can become a critic to give comments and advice on the various phenomenon. The research data is the characteristics of social media users.

The number of respondents in online questionnaires were 505 people. The characteristics of respondents can be seen in table 1.

Table 1. Respondents characteristics

	Males		Females			
Gender	66,6%		33.4%			
	Aged 11-19		Aged 20-60		Aged > 60	
Age	31.2%		68,2%		0,6%	
	JHS	SHS	Bachelor	Master	Doctorate	
Education	1,2%	58,2%	18,6%	15,4%	5,7%	
	Student	Government Employee	Employee	Enterpreneur	Lecturer	Etc
Occupation	69,8%	10,9%	6,5%	3,5%	3,5%	5,8%

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Internet media has changed the way humans interact and communicate. Humans as internet users can access information, share it with other people or groups, giving comments and creating news (information) then share it. The Internet has created a cyber community without space and time limits. Digital media which can connect people globally is social media application. Digital media is an information and communication network that can replicate human activities (Pratika et al., 2018). Current issues can be accepted by social media users fast. Various events can be accessed in real-time on social media and at the same time spread to social media applications through Twitter, Youtube, WhatsApp, etc.

The research shows that as many as 62% of internet users access information using social media, and 32.9 using online media news. Based on the respondents' answers, the most current issues get from social media is Covid-19, including 60.6% related to Covid 19 vaccines, 43% about covid victims and 25.1% related to rapid test (SWAB). Social media users incline to read the whole information received. The data shows that as many as 77% of social media users have read and listened to the whole content of the information. Even though they have the freedom to share the information they have received, the inclination to share information is only 32% of the total respondents (505 people).

Reading information messages about Covid-19 shows that they understand the context of the information received and have an awareness of the importance of this information being shared with others. Amounting to 88.3 per cent of them listen and understand well the Covid-19 information before it is shared with others.

Covid-19 (60.6%) which becomes dominant issues or discussions on social media, indeed, also spreads fake news about Covid-19. Hoax information in Indonesia which is dominant on social media makes people confused and difficult to distinguish the real one. The community is confronted by more than one fake news every day and the most hoax spreads on social media (Mastel, 2019). Our research involving 505 respondents showed that the frequency of getting hoaxes on social media was 44% (often), 22.2% very often, 22% (average), 10% (rarely), and 1.6% (never). Based on data obtained from Kominfo, the most widespread hoax issue for the period 23 January 2020 – 20 July 2021 was Covid-19, with a total of 1775 issues on social media (https://www.kominfo.go.id/).

Reading hoaxes on social media produces universal meanings in society, namely:

1. The COVID-19 vaccines are dangerous and have fatal side effects
2. The Covid-19 vaccines are harmful and dangerous
3. The use of AstraZeneca vaccines causing death
4. The Covid-19 vaccines are haram
5. Consuming garlic can prevent the transmission of Covid-19
6. The covid-19 vaccines are very dangerous and contain poison
7. The Covid-19 vaccines can cause death
8. The dangers of vaccines make people afraid to be vaccinated
9. The Covid-19 vaccines take their toll
10. There is a chip in the Covid-19 vaccines.

The universal meaning of the covid-19 hoax has an impact on changing public perceptions of the Covid-19 vaccination. People have concerns and are afraid to be vaccinated. Soeparto, a criminal sociologist from Gadjah Mada University who was interviewed by journalists, said that people were afraid to receive the Covid-19 vaccination because of the spread of hoax information on social media. So far, hoax information has been found that contradicts the Covid-19 vaccination. This confusing information has triggered public anxiety about being vaccinated against Covid-19. This interview is related to the news by the online media Suara Jogja.co which said that the Covid-19 vaccination program in the Special Region of Yogyakarta (DIY) had begun to enter its second phase. After health workers, the target of vaccination was expanded to public servants, ranging from public servants in government agencies, journalists, tourism officers, including market traders. But, only a few of the targets for the second stage of the Covid-19

vaccination, especially traders, are not yet willing to be vaccinated because they are afraid of it (Eleonora & Weadcaksana, 2021).

One example of fake news is entitled The Covid-19 vaccination destroys the body's genetics and causes death two years later).

[HOAKS] Vaksinasi Covid-19 Merusak Genetika Tubuh dan Menyebabkan Kematian 2 Tahun Kemudian

Picture 1. The dissemination of Hoax: The Covid-19 vaccination destroys the body's genetics and causes death two years later. Source: https://www.kominfo.go.id/

A chain message circulated on the WhatsApp platform which stated that everyone who had been vaccinated against Covid-19 would die 2 years later. Furthermore, people who have been vaccinated will experience genetic damage and cannot be saved. It was also stated that the United States Supreme Court had cancelled mass Covid-19 vaccinations for this reason.

The Kominfo Office of the Republic of Indonesia has clarified by stating that in fact, the information in the chain message is not official information submitted by the authorities, such as the WHO. The claim that the Covid-19 vaccines can damage genetics is a hoax, this has been clarified by the Covid-19 Task Force through its official website covid19.go.id which says that genetic modification can only occur if foreign DNA is inserted into the nucleus of human cells, the Covid-19 vaccines do not do that at all. Reporting from medcom.id Fact Check, the claim that the United States cancels massive Covid-19 vaccinations because the vaccines are considered dangerous is a hoax. The United States government does not require universal vaccination and the Supreme Court has not considered this issue either.

Fake news that has spread on social media has become public consumption. They consume hoax messages through the process of reading linguistic messages and connotations. Linguistic messages are hoax information that is conveyed in social media, and connotation messages are a symbolic exchange process that produces layers of meaning. Layers of meaning that can become victims of public information are hoax messages that produce social codes or social meanings in society that have an impact on changing attitudes and behaviour. There are dialogues in society that are social

codes, for example, the words "covid vaccines can cause death", "the dangers of vaccines make people afraid to be vaccinated", "Covid-19 vaccines take its toll", and "there is a chip in the Covid-19 vaccines". The universal meaning of the Covid-10 hoax message can be considered real (truth) by the public. There is speech in the community which is a social code, for example, the speech vaccine.

Information technology (internet) has had a major impact on social change in society (Karman, 2014). Social media is the most widely used application for interacting and communicating. Social change in society is changing the way people communicate, namely social media has become a gateway to information. All human activities (individual affairs, business, politics and others) are carried out with digital media users (social media). According to Mc Quail (2010), social media is a social network that has formed a new pattern of interacting and communicating. The new pattern that Mc Quail refers to is 1). Allocution, patterns of information dissemination from one source to several points that are spread simultaneously; 2). Conversations, patterns of communication and interaction between one person and another person or group can take place at the same time. 3). Consultation, a communication pattern that functions as a medium of information that can be used for various jobs or affairs, for example consulting with doctors, architects, lawyers, and others, 4). Registration, a communication pattern used to obtain information from the public for certain purposes.

Social media as a gateway to information not only functions to access correct information but also hoax information. People who cannot sort hoax information

can forward it to other people or groups (Jenkins, 2006). The spread of one news repeatedly in the context of social media and becoming the dominant news can result in the reading of Hoax messages that have universal meaning in society and become real information.

4. CONCLUSION

Hoax is a message that contains meaning. Hoaxes use the same sign system as other information that is considered true. Both use signs (verbal and nonverbal language) in conveying messages. Hoaxes can also naturalize the message conveyed, a message that is made logical so that it is accepted as a normal message by the public. Hoax is dominant in society because the spread of the news in large numbers can produce a social code or universal meaning and is considered a real one. Language is a sign system (verbal) used to convey messages, either hoaxes or real information.

The best solution in dealing with hoaxes is digital literacy. Literacy by users is very important and vital to understand and respond to hoax issues that are spreading on social media. Digital literacy knowledge possessed by media users can understand, evaluate and be critical of various hoax information. They can distinguish hoax news and stop spreading it to other people or social media grips.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Burhanuddin and Hasyim understood and developed the theoretical ideas presented. They apply theory in writing and verified the analytical methods. They supervised the findings of this paper and discussed the results and contributed to this paper

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