



The Abortion Narratives in Indonesian Media: Portrayal The Legalization and Accessibility of Safe Abortion Services on Fulfilling SDGs

*Andriko Sandria^{1,2} Berlian Hanifatus Azzahrah¹ Maureen Airliana Rachmad¹
Mohammad Aldio Hendico¹ Regina Dinda Hapsari¹

¹ Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia

² ASEAN Studies Center, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Indonesia

andrikosandria.ma@staff.uns.ac.id

Abstract. Abortion is a concept that is still highly debated in every layer of Indonesian society. There is limited safe service available and accessible by the public in Indonesia which has become a challenge to achieve SDG 3's goal to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all. Media has a role in spreading knowledge and shaping narratives on public discourses, including the topic of abortion. In this paper, we examine how narratives in Indonesian media portray the concept of abortion and accessibility on getting proper health care services for abortion in Indonesia. Using the semiotic triangle by Charles S. Pierce in analyzing news articles and other contents, we found certain symbolisms and references used to describe the concept of abortion. We also explore more on this by dissecting symbolisms on foreign-owned media as a comparison to identify the differences between them. Local Indonesian media portrays abortion as heretical with the use of the word "evil", "cruel", and other malevolent words to describe the process of abortion. Foreign-owned media tends to have a more neutral characterization of abortion cases. Indonesia media shows a tendency to support anti-abortion policies as desired by the majority of Indonesian society. It can be concluded that the Indonesian media depicts abortion as a despicable act and the possibility of developing safe abortion services in Indonesia is still small

Keywords: Media, Abortion, Narratives, SDGs, Indonesia

1 Introduction

The legalization and accessibility of safe abortion services in Indonesia is a controversial topic. Indonesian Ulama Council Fatwa Number 4 of 2005 allows abortion in pregnancies resulting from rape on the grounds of concern for the future life of the child resulting from rape. The National Human Rights Commission and the National Commission for the Protection of Women consider abortion in rape victims permissible by considering the psychological impact on the victim who received unpleasant treatment. Meanwhile, several Community Organizations in Indonesia have different views regarding abortion. The Muhammadiyah Central Board rejects the legalization of abortion because abortion is contrary to the doctor's oath which states that they respect the right to life from the fertilization process. Nahdlatul Ulama issued Muslimat to request a review of the legalization of abortion in rape victims because

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there is no control mechanism to ensure that the pregnancy is the result of rape so the regulation can be misused [1].

Law Number 17 of 2023 and Government Regulation Number 61 of 2014 concerning reproductive health have regulated legal abortion in Indonesia with criteria and conditions that must be met. Two criteria for legal abortion may be carried out in Indonesia, namely abortion due to an emergency medical condition (pregnancy that threatens the health and life of the mother, pregnancy that threatens the health and life of the fetus), and pregnancy that is a rape victim. An abortion can only be carried out by an abortion eligibility team which consists of at least two health workers and is known to be a doctor who is authorized and has the competence to perform abortions. Other conditions that must be met to carry out an abortion include: carried out by a doctor according to standards, carried out in a health service facility that meets the requirements according to ministerial decrees, with the consent or request of the pregnant woman, with the husband's permission except for rape victims, not discriminatory, and not prioritize material rewards. Specifically for abortions in cases of rape, abortions may only be carried out no later than 40 days after the first day of the last menstruation.

This research examined the narratives that appear in the news media regarding abortions that occur in Indonesia. This narrative is important to study in more depth because it is closely related to the construction of abortion which is widespread in society. The presence of a legal basis for the legality of abortion is not yet in line with the accessibility of health services for carrying out abortions. The media portrayal in the abortion narrative will be related to efforts to fulfill SDG'S number 3.

2 Literature Review

Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory is foundational in understanding the nature of signs and their role in communication and meaning-making. Peirce's model is characterized by a triadic relationship among three components: the sign (or representamen), the object it refers to, and the interpretant, which is the understanding or meaning derived from the sign. This triadic structure is crucial for comprehending how signs function within various contexts, including literature, visual arts, and even scientific inquiry.

Peirce's semiotics diverges from other semiotic theories, such as those proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure, by emphasizing the dynamic and interpretative nature of signs. According to Németh, Peirce's triadic model provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding semiotics, as it encapsulates the interaction between the sign, its referent, and the interpretive process that occurs in the mind of the observer. This perspective is echoed by Brier, who notes that Peirce's semiotic paradigm is not merely about static representations but involves an ongoing process of semiosis, where signs continuously evolve and generate meaning in context [2].

The application of Peirce's semiotic theory extends beyond traditional linguistics to various fields such as fashion, education, and environmental studies. Dimache employs Peirce's semiotic methodology to interpret non-linguistic signs in heritage sites, illustrating how Peirce's framework can elucidate the relationship between cultural artifacts and their meanings within social contexts [3].

Furthermore, Peirce's semiotic theory has significant implications for education and information systems. Smith discusses how Peircean semiotics can enhance educational practices by fostering a deeper understanding of the relationships among signs, knowledge, and learning processes. This is particularly relevant in the context of digital literacy, where understanding the semiotic dimensions of information can improve the effectiveness of educational resources [4].

The narrative surrounding abortion in Indonesian media is complex and multifaceted, reflecting societal attitudes, legal frameworks, and public health implications. Abortion in Indonesia is heavily stigmatized, influenced by both legal restrictions and cultural norms that often frame it as a moral failing. This stigma is evident in media representations, which frequently portray abortion as a taboo subject, contributing to a culture of silence and misinformation surrounding reproductive health issues [5].

Research indicates that the Indonesian legal framework permits abortion only under specific circumstances, such as medical emergencies, fetal impairment, or rape, and even then, only within a limited timeframe [6], [7]. Despite these restrictions, a significant number of women seek abortions, often resorting to unsafe methods due to the lack of accessible and safe healthcare options [8]. This discrepancy between legal provisions and actual practices highlights the inadequacies of the legal system in addressing women's reproductive health needs and the societal pressures that drive women to seek illegal abortions [5].

Media portrayals of abortion in Indonesia often reflect broader societal attitudes that stigmatize women who seek abortions. The framing of abortion in the media tends to emphasize the negative consequences and moral implications, reinforcing the notion that abortion is an undesirable choice [9]. This aligns with findings from other contexts, where media representations contribute to the normalization of stigma around abortion, framing it as a universal social fact rather than a socio-cultural construct. The impact of such representations is profound, as they shape public perceptions and can deter women from seeking necessary medical care [8], [9].

Moreover, the role of social media in shaping abortion narratives cannot be overlooked. Platforms like TikTok have emerged as spaces for discussing abortion, albeit with a limited representation of personal experiences [10]. This reflects a broader trend where social media serves as both a platform for advocacy and a space where stigma can be perpetuated. The dichotomy of these narratives illustrates the challenges faced by women in navigating their reproductive choices within a restrictive socio-legal environment [10].

3 Methods

This research adopted a descriptive qualitative research method with the aim of analyzing and collecting data regarding symbols in the 3 news media with the most readers reporting on abortion in Indonesia. The sucked symbols are analyzed using Charles Sanders Peirce's triangular semiotic theory. The research data includes symbols that appear in news narratives that make abortion the main topic.

Data collection techniques involve observation, documentation and interviews. Observations are carried out to record observed phenomena using the five senses, while documentation is in the form of symbols that appear in news articles.

In terms of data analysis techniques, this research follows the Miles and Huberman approach with the following steps: collection of traditional symbol data, analysis of symbol data in the context of tradition, and application of Peirce's semiotic theory which includes interpretation, representation and objects. The analysis results are then reviewed by an expert to ensure the accuracy and validity of the findings. Researchers also checked the validity of the research results to ensure the validity of the data obtained. The entire research process was carried out directly in the field and involved various informants and data sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the topic being researched.

4 Results and Discussion

The following are the results of the findings of symbols used in reporting about abortion in several media in Indonesia.

4.1 Kompas

Kompas.com generally uses more neutral and objective symbols or representamens in describing the topics of abortion, explaining the risks, the danger, and the legality of it. These articles explain the law on abortion in Indonesia, specifically UU Kesehatan No.17 Th.2023. Highlighting that safe and legal abortion only exists for those who are sexually violated and or medically in danger. Medical experts explain the risks and hazards to ensure the information comes from a reputable source. The use of a factual and objective language approach to abortion is meant to give the message that the news is not meant to steer readers to certain perspectives. This “signifier” through which they communicate about abortion without attaching emotional or subjective connotations forms an objective interpretation that invites readers to view abortion as a legal and health-related matter.

It is also important to note that Kompas.com also slightly touches on the lack of access to safe abortion when the law clearly states that they are obligated to give access to safe abortion to those whose conditions are met—namely, women who are sexually violated and in mortal danger due to the pregnancy. Not only that, the unfair handling of sexual violence cases also stems from the inability of police officers to favor those who got sexually violated. The main example of this is how many victims are reluctant to report such cases due to how the police interrogate victims just like they are the perpetrators. Furthermore, case administration is time-consuming and convoluted to the point where reporting the case is not worth the hassle. With those contexts, Kompas.com aims readers to feel dissatisfied and critical of the lack of access to safe abortion for victims of sexual violence and for those whose lives are at risk due to the pregnancy.”

Even so, Kompas.com also uses certain keywords with negative connotations in explaining the acts of abortion. Some of these articles use the phrase “ngorek kelapa” (to scrape coconuts) to describe the process of abortion. This is to indicate that the process of abortion is gruesome due to how this symbol pushes the reader to visualize

the process as similar to scraping the inside of a coconut. Imagining the scraping of one's skin brings to mind pain and bleeding; imagining it happening internally evokes an even more intense sense of harm and discomfort. This feeling of discomfort when discussing abortion is what Kompas.com is trying to elicit from the reader.

4.2 **Tribun**

TribunNews conveys much of its news about abortion with more malevolent or sensationalized symbolism. It uses these symbols to communicate the risks and dangers of abortion without mentioning the nuances or accessibility to safe abortions. Hence, these representamen aim to shape the reader's perspective with a certain interpretation of the symbolism used.

TribunNews articles use the words "pembunuhan berencana" (planned murder) and "seks bebas" (free sex or premarital sex) in association with abortion. The representamen used paints abortion as something equal to planned murder, in other words, it states abortion as a serious crime and is supposed to be treated as such. The use of "seks bebas" or premarital sex generalizes all abortions in Indonesia. The construction of the word "premarital sex" was largely influenced by religious belief in Indonesia. As an extension, abortion is always a result of immoral, and impious behavior. The symbols mentioned convey the message that a sinful act caused abortion, therefore it is natural to hate it.

Other representamens that is used by Tribun are "pendarahan hebat" (heavy blood loss), "bersimbah darah" (drenched in blood), "gumpalan darah" (blood clot). These symbols involve blood imagery, signaling that abortion is disgusting and dangerous. This imagery then evokes a visceral feeling due to the association between blood loss and death. The problem lies with the gap in the information served in these articles. It omits the details of how unsafe abortion might cause huge blood loss, and eventually death, whereas safe abortion exists. Therefore the object or the reaction pushed is how hazardous abortions are regardless of whether it is secure or not.

Some articles also used "eksekutor" (executor), "ruang sunat massal" (mass circumcision room), and "hanya 5 sampai 10 menit" (only 5 to 10 minutes). The symbols in this particular case. The added "only 5 to 10 minutes" gives the message as if it's easy to take someone's life. "mass circumcision room" also builds on to the notion that abortion is done in cold blood. This symbol implies that abortion is performed by a horde of people. With this, Tribun wants to push the narrative that abortion is a vile act and aim the reader feel terrified of it.

The association of abortion with "tidak ada layanan" (no service), "zona abu-abu" (gray zone) also gives the impression that the government is careless in addressing the lack of access to safe and legal abortion. Now, even when there are regulations regarding it, the topic of abortion remains controversial and unsupported by the masses. The controversy surfaced due to how Indonesians see abortion as heretical, as it is being heavily Hence, even if safe abortion is accessible, people will still demonize those who are eligible by law to perform this procedure. The reaction Tribun wants to elicit with this symbol is fear against abortion due to minimal access to safe abortions. The difference between the moral value of the masses and the legality of abortions then adds more to this fear.

4.3 **Detik**

In contrast to the two previously mentioned news channels, Detik.com features many reports focusing on criminal cases. Given that abortion is still illegal in Indonesia, these reports fall under the category of criminal act. While personal opinions from the writers are seldom

included in this type of article, they still play an important role in influencing the article's direction through their choice of headlines. This highlights the potential for writers to guide the narrative. The representamen and symbols we find in this news channel are mostly taken from the headline, the keyword they select to construct the article's title. The title and headline news about abortion that is uploaded in Detik.news mostly uses words with negative connotations as symbols such as the word "keji", "nekat", "miris", and many more. These terms are frequently used in headlines to portray the issues as controversial and attract the readers at the news site to click on the article.

Using semiotic theory, the Detik.com news channel employs symbols such as "keji," "nekat," and "septic tank." In the context of Charles S. Peirce's semiotics theory, the representamen used in this news channel is "pembuangan janin ke septic tank." The septic tank, as a symbol, evokes a negative internal representation of abortion, portraying it as filthy, hidden, and akin to human waste. It depicts the process as dirty and hidden away, much like something unpleasant that is swept out of sight. This imagery suggests a stark comparison, equating an aborted fetus with human waste, reinforcing the idea that such a choice is not only undesirable but also something to be discarded and concealed. The symbolism emphasizes society's often harsh judgment surrounding the topic of abortion.

The next keyword that is used as a symbol is the word "keji," which describes the actions of the two individuals involved in the abortion. The term "keji" symbolizes cold-blooded behavior, indicating the ease of committing a horrible act without hesitation. This interpretation led readers to believe abortion is a morally reprehensible act and that the perpetrator who carries out this act will be considered to have committed a disgraceful act, ultimately facing negative judgment from society.

Additionally, this news channel frequently uses the term "nekat" as a symbol to describe the act of abortion. In this context, the word "nekat" is utilized to label abortion as a reckless behavior. By labeling abortion in this way, the channel conveys a sense of danger and portrays it as a potentially life-threatening choice, while also implying it is an impulsive behavior carried out without careful consideration. Overall, the examples above illustrate how Detik.com often uses negatively connoted keywords for the topic of abortion in their articles. This deliberate choice of keywords cultivates a narrative that positions abortion as not only a personal health issue but also a moral failing. Detik.com's frequent use of derogatory keywords contributes to the perpetuation of social stigmas and creates a hostile environment toward people seeking abortions, ultimately influencing public opinion and attitudes toward reproductive rights in Indonesia.

5 Conclusion

The three news media with the largest viewers in Indonesia present symbols that create images of abortions carried out in society. The use of symbols to show cruelty and health impacts that lead to death still dominates media narratives in Indonesia. This has an impact on efforts to provide adequate and easily accessible health services for carrying out abortions. There is a high level of rejection or resistance among the community towards efforts to provide quality and safe services to the community. So it can be concluded that the narrative of abortion reporting in Indonesia contributes to the difficulty of fulfilling SDGs number 3 in Indonesia, especially for people who need abortion services.

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