News Narrative of The May1998 Tragedy: A Comparative Analysis of Editorials in Kompas, Republika, and Suara Karya (1999-2008)

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Abstract. This research analyzes the narrative construction of the May 1998 tragedy in the editorials of three Indonesian newspapers: Kompas, Republika, and Suara Karya from 1999 to 2008. Editorials were selected because they reflect the media's perspective on particular events and influence public opinion, political agendas, and social debates. Using case studies method, this study found that Kompas published the most editorials related to the commemoration of the May 1998 Tragedy compared to Republika and Suara Karya. The narrative built by Kompas emphasized the connection between the May Tragedy and the reform movement, while Republika and Suara Karya were more critical of the achievements of the reform and the uncovering of the events. Additionally, this study reveals that the narrative about sexual violence during the May riots gradually disappeared from Kompas editorials. In terms of group analysis, all three newspapers positioned the "us" group as victims and reform actors, while the "them" group included those involved in the riots or in the failure to transparently uncover the May Tragedy. This study highlights how media frames controversial historical events through their respective ideological and political lenses.

Keywords: News narrative, May 1998 Tragedy, Editorials, Newspaper

1 Introduction

Besides news, the media also features columns that contain opinions or viewpoints on current events. When written by the editorial team, such a column is called an editorial. Editorials explicitly present the media's perspective and can be viewed as the media's opinion on a particular issue. Written in an argumentative style, editorials include not only reasons but also persuasive elements. More specifically, editorials provide definitions, explanations, and evaluations on current topics or issues [1]. An editorial is a narrative reflecting the media's viewpoint on an event, positioning the media itself. Thus, an editorial is an explicit form of social cognition adapted to the ideology of that media outlet. It is essential to note that opinions and ideologies hold significant sociopolitical and cultural roles.

This paper investigating how the narrative of the May 1998 tragedy is constructed in the editorials of three Indonesian newspapers. In this context, opinions and ideologies are expressed socially and culturally through newspaper editorials. Editorials play an

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essential role in shaping public opinion, influencing political agendas, and driving social debate around political decision-making and actions. A newspaper editorial reflects the ideology and opinions of the journalists who write it, both as journalism professionals and as members of society. Editorials illustrate social representation and participation in the complex processes of newspaper production and reception [2].

2 Literature Review

Newspaper editorials have long been a subject of study. Bonyadi and Moses [3] conducted a linguistic analysis of The New York Times and the English-language edition of Tehran Times, revealing that both newspapers exhibit subjectivity in their headlines. Meanwhile, Izadi and Hakimeh [4] applied Edward Said's concept of orientalism alongside Van Dijk's ideology framework to examine three American newspapers: The Washington Post, The New York Times, and The Wall Street Journal. They analyzed editorials from these newspapers between 1984 and 2004, focusing on the topic of Iran's nuclear program. Their findings indicate that The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post were more inclined to apply orientalism concepts than The New York Times.
Triyana et al [5] analyze the common patterns found in the editorials of The Jakarta Post and Kompas newspapers. A mixed-method approach was employed, with a checklist used as the research instrument. The procedure involved categorizing all editorial samples (10 texts each from The Jakarta Post and Kompas) according to thematic progression patterns. The results indicate three thematic progression patterns across the editorials: derived themes in 10 texts, constant progression in 8 texts, and linear progression in 2 texts. A key difference in thematic progression between The Jakarta Post and Kompas editorials lies in the sequence of pattern usage. In conclusion, the thematic progression in both The Jakarta Post and Kompas editorials primarily consists of derived themes and constant progression patterns.

Meanwhile Ningsih [6] investigates how terrorism-related information is discursively constructed in Indonesian newspapers. The Jakarta Post, a prominent English-language newspaper in Indonesia, has extensively covered terrorism incidents, particularly since the 2002 Bali bombing, with a focus on its editorials. The study identifies recurring definitions and terminology, as well as inconsistencies in expressions related to terrorism and extremism, in the newspaper's editorials published since 2014. Findings reveal that The Jakarta Post has shown sympathy toward victims and support for them while depicting perpetrators through an ideological lens, distinguishing their ideologies from religious practices in Indonesia. Furthermore, the newspaper frames terrorism as a threat to democratic values and categorizes it as a serious risk to national security and social stability. In response, the editorials propose policy recommendations, critique law enforcement for shortcomings, and advocate for secular values to combat terrorism in the country.

3 Methods

This research employs a case study method. A case study is a careful investigation conducted on specific social units, individuals, or incidents to identify factors contributing to their success or failure [7]. In this context, the social unit examined consists of the editorials published by Kompas, Republika, and Suara Karya on the anniversaries of the May 1998 tragedy over a ten-year span (1999–2008). According to Bryne and Charles (2009), the case study method allows for in-depth exploration of complex phenomena with a focus on social, cultural, and historical contexts.

The selection of Kompas, Republika, and Suara Karya was made based on specific considerations. The newspaper Kompas is widely recognized as a nationalist and credible media outlet with comprehensive reporting [8]. Although historically associated with the Catholic community, its editorial team includes editors from Protestant and Muslim backgrounds, including graduates of Islamic institutions, underscoring its commitment to serving a broad readership across different groups [9]. In contrast, Republika is a national newspaper founded by Indonesia's Muslim community, with its establishment inspired by the formation of the Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI). Aiming to present a modern, moderate, Muslim, nationalist, and people-centered perspective, Republika maintained a certain closeness to the government, especially when it received its Publishing License (SIUPP) No. 283/SK/MENPEN/SIUPP/A7/1992 on December 19, 1992, allegedly facilitated by the connection between Soeharto and Habibie (Rusadi, 2002). Meanwhile, Suara Karya is known as a pro-government, pro-military newspaper, with its masthead listing figures like Ali Moertopo, Soejono Hoemardani, Sapardjo, and Sudharmono, SH, signaling its alignment with the government [10].

4 Results and Discussion

The analysis of editorials from Kompas (Tajuk Rencana), Republika (Tajuk), and Suara Karya (whose editorial title was later changed to "Editorial") published in conjunction with news covering the commemoration of the May 1998 tragedy—typically between May 12 and 15 each year from 1999 to 2008—becomes essential. Among these three print media, Kompas published a total of 8 editorials, Republika published 3, and Suara Karya published 5. In terms of frequency, Kompas stands out as the medium with the most editorial pieces expressing opinions on issues related to the commemoration of the May 1998 tragedy.

The titles of Kompas editorials are as follows: "Tragedi Trisakti Setahun Lalu, Pemicu Maraknya Gelombang Reformasi" [11]; "Satu Tahun Kerusuhan Mei" [12]; "Ketika Gema Kekerasan Mei 1998 Masih Berkepanjangan Hingga Hari Ini" [13]; "Jangan Hanya Merasa Untung Karena Kerusuhan Mei '98 Tidak Terulang"[14]; "Membangkitkan Gairah dari Tragedi Mei" [15]; "Peristiwa Mei 1998" [16] "Jakarta 10 Tahun Lalu" [17]; and "Formasi Tanpa Transformasi" [18].

Meanwhile, Republika editorial titles include: "Janji Itu Harus Dilunasi" [19]; "Tragedi Trisakti" [20]; and "Delapan Tahun Reformasi" [21].

Finally, Suara Karya editorials are titled: "Kasus Trisakti dan Penegakan Hukum yang Adil"[22]; "Tragedi Mei dan Alur Perjalanan Reformasi"[23]; "Reformasi Mestinya

Perkuat Peran Negara"[24]; "Tragedi Mei 1998 Bukan Misteri" [25]; and "Bijak Merespon Aspirasi Rakyat" [26].

In terms of frequency, none of the three media consistently featured an editorial with every May 1998 commemoration. Even Kompas, which never fails to cover the May 1998 tragedy in its news reports, does not consistently address it in its editorial column. This suggests that there is not always a direct link between news coverage and editorial topics. Consequently, while news articles may encourage readers to remember the May 1998 events, editorials are free to select other topics, sometimes choosing to overlook this issue altogether. Nonetheless, as the media outlet with the most editorials addressing the May 1998 tragedy, Kompas reflects ideological values that consider the event worthy of ongoing public discourse. Kompas associates the May 1998 tragedy with reform, which it defines as encompassing all areas of public life. According to Kompas, however, the reform movement has yet to yield breakthroughs and real change.

The reform movement has increasingly lost momentum, failing to make significant breakthroughs due to the lack of a transformative process based on a forward-looking vision. Transformation in value systems, social and cultural structures, as well as in science and technology, is essential to driving progress [27].

Kompas also frequently links the May 1998 tragedy with the Trisakti tragedy, viewing them as interconnected, though not in a strict cause-and-effect relationship. Kompas acknowledges that over the past decade, commemorating the Trisakti tragedy has become a ritual. Nonetheless, efforts to uncover the issues surrounding this event remain shrouded in darkness.

The commemoration of the Trisakti Tragedy from May 12-15 has become an annual ritual. The recurring demand is for justice and a rejection of impunity. Yet, after ten years, the call for justice for the victims continues to be a political commodity—unresolved and without closure [28].

An interesting finding relates to the use of the phrase "sexual violence." This phrase first appeared multiple times in the Kompas editorial on May 14th, 1999, alongside the term "rape."

The findings highlight the capacity for inhumane actions: looting, arson, murder, and committing sexual violence against women (paragraph 3). This resulted in the deaths of no fewer than 288 individuals and more than 50 women, according to the Joint Fact-Finding Team (TGPF) for the May riots, who became victims of sexual violence (paragraph 5). Among these findings, it was noted that sexual violence occurred during the May riots. In this context, the TGPF also urged the government to clarify the events of May 14th, 1998 (paragraph 6). For instance, while the government stated that "there was no systematic mass rape," it acknowledged that there were incidents of rape affecting 52 victims and sexual harassment of 4 others (paragraph 8).

However, the editorial the following day [29], titled "When the Echoes of May 1998 Violence Persist to This Day," did not include the terms "sexual violence" and "rape." Since then, Kompas editorials published in conjunction with the commemoration of the May 1998 tragedy have not mentioned "sexual violence" or "rape" again. Similarly, Suara Karya only used the term "rape" once in its editorial titled "Tragedi Mei 1998 Bukan Misteri" [30]:

"In the western region of Jakarta, there were also acts of abuse and rape against individuals of Chinese descent. Thousands of people died. Does this not fall under the category of crimes against humanity?"

Republika also addressed this issue in its editorial titled "Janji itu Harus Dilunasi" [31]: "There is an interrelated issue between the demands for Soeharto's resignation, the shooting of Trisakti students, and the acts of looting, arson, murder, and rape."

As is well known, editorials are not only written directly for readers but also indirectly address power institutions, social organizations, politicians, and many of the actors who are sources of news, whose authority can be supported or criticized [32]. Thus, the absence of the terms "rape," "sexual assault," and "sexual violence" in the editorials of these three newspapers suggests a form of support for the authorities who reject the Joint Fact-Finding Team's assertion that there were instances of mass sexual violence during the riots on May 13-15, 1998.

The absence of the terms "rape," "sexual assault," and "sexual violence" in the editorials aligns with their absence in news narratives, headlines, and articles. As previously mentioned, the Joint Fact-Finding Team (TGPF) was established to seek evidence and background regarding the sexual violence against several women during the May 1998 riots. Thus, the representation of the social cognition of the journalists from these three newspapers through their editorials suggests skepticism about the truth of the allegations of mass rape or sexual violence posited by the TGPF. This aligns with the lack of news narratives regarding rape and sexual violence in these three newspapers during the riots. More significantly, the absence of the terms "rape," "rapist," and "sexual violence" resonates with the government's denial of any instances of mass rape during the May 1998 riots. The riots were framed as events of looting, destruction, and arson allegedly carried out by a group of people, intentionally excluding mass rape.

While the terms "rape," "sexual assault," and "sexual violence" are absent, these four editorials employ the term "reform" in their titles: "Tragedi Trisakti Setahun Lalu, Pemicu Maraknya Gelombang Reformasi" [33]; "Delapan Tahun Reformasi" [34]; "Tragedi Mei dan Alur Perjalanan Reformasi"[35] ; and "Reformasi Mestinya Perkuat Peran Negara" [36]. Reform becomes an important narrative in the editorials of these three newspapers. It is related to the political events in Indonesia from 1996 to 2001, a period marked by turmoil, intrigue, tragedy, and mystery [37].

Although important, the reform movement is viewed as failing to meet its initial ideals of eliminating the practices of corruption, collusion, and nepotism (KKN). The following Kompas editorial illustrates this:

"It must be acknowledged that the reform movement has paved the way for the democratization process, respect for human rights, and press freedom. However, overall, the reform movement has faltered. Several important agendas that were championed by the reform movement in its early stages, such as the eradication of corruption, collusion, and nepotism (KKN), have not been implemented consistently.

The reform movement has increasingly lost momentum, failing to achieve significant breakthroughs due to the lack of a transformative process grounded in a long-term vision. Indeed, transformation in value systems, social and cultural structures, as well as in science and technology is essential for driving progress [38].

In a certain sense, the fall of Soeharto and the emergence of a new government are results of the reform movement. The tasks entrusted to the reform movement must be ethically fulfilled. Among these, in addition to addressing the cases of the May riots, is

the establishment of a new government free from corruption, collusion, and nepotism (KKN), as well as the transparent and fair handling of the Trisakti tragedy [39].
The tone of the Republika editorial from May 12th 2006, is more negative:
"What are the results of the reform movement? Indonesia is now the largest democracy in the world after India and the United States. The president is elected directly by the people, governors are elected directly by the people, and so are mayors and regents. The constitutional process is also carried out democratically" (paragraph 4).
"We can be proud of the rapid development of democracy within a short period. Many countries admire the acceleration of democracy in this nation; however, pride is not enough. What is important for the people is whether reform has brought prosperity to society" (paragraph 5).
"In reality, after the reform, riots can easily erupt in this country. Even minor issues have resulted in clashes that end in loss of life" (paragraph 6).
"The reform movement has been in a state of coma, once popular two or three years ago, as no significant changes have occurred in the social and economic lives of the people. The great hopes that surged with the fall of Soeharto have not been realized. Democracy has even been twisted into 'democrazy' (paragraph 10).
In its editorial [40] Suara Karya also expressed how hopes for the reform movement have faded:
"Now, four years have passed since we embarked on the Reform Order. An order that was initially filled with a thousand hopes now suddenly feels extinguished. Why? Because the behaviors of corruption, collusion, and nepotism (KKN) have not stopped. In fact, reports suggest that they have even increased" (paragraph 3).
As an opinion piece, editorials can also reflect polarization within groups, portraying an "in-group" (Us) versus an "out-group" (Them). The title of the editorial "Don't Just Feel Lucky That the May '98 Riots Did Not Recur" [41]emphasizes that "we" (Us) should not be complacent simply because the May 1998 riots have not happened again. The editorial states:
"We may say, 'Thank goodness it has been contained!' However, what we should truly ask is, why must incidents and acts of violence occur? Why must it erupt again precisely on May 13th, at the very moment when society is commemorating and thus reminded of the traumatic riots of May 13-14, 1998?".

4.1. **Them vs Us**

The Kompas editorial reminds the community (Us) that riots could recur, whether intentionally or unintentionally. The public is cautioned that the events of May 1998 have left a lasting trauma from acts of violence.
The Glodok incident on May 13th, 2000, illustrates this tendency. It reveals another aspect of the violence: the presence of young individuals who quickly became part of the crowd at the scene. Residents of the Glodok area remarked on the appearance of unfamiliar masses, presumed to come from other places.
The statement regarding the presence of unfamiliar individuals suggests the involvement of another group (Them) in the local riots. This condition is reminiscent of the May 1998 riots, which were suspected to involve unknown groups that contributed to the provocation of looting and arson.

The distinction between "us" and "them" is also positioned by Republika. In its editorial on May 14th 1999, it states:

The rapid succession of events has made the May 1998 riots and the shooting of Trisakti students forgotten. There is a sense that recent occurrences are seen as a "blessing in disguise," hoped to conceal traces that would lead to uncovering those behind the May 1998 events.

Republika suspects that there are groups trying to obscure the possibility of revealing the May 1998 events. These "them" groups pose a danger to "us," as expressed in the following lines of the editorial:

This tendency is very dangerous. It is not impossible that a "scorched earth" politics of "forget it" will become a permanent pattern in Indonesia's historical journey. Here, the issue is not merely the scale of losses and the number of lives lost. More than that, it is a matter of how the government can create public trust that such horrifying acts of terror will not recur.

Therefore, without diminishing the importance of other riots, the dark chapter of May 1998 must be fully revealed. The government has an obligation to do so, even without the promises of BJ Habibie and Wiranto.

The government, as part of "us," is called to establish public trust by eliminating all possibilities of terror in society. The primary public trust will be established if the events of May 1998 are thoroughly investigated. Moreover, Republika explicitly states that even without the promises of BJ Habibie and Wiranto, the government still has a duty to fully disclose the tragic events. Implicitly, Republika asserts that the May 1998 tragedy must be uncovered regardless of the president BJ Habibie and the military commander uncovered..

In contrast, Suara Karya presents a different perspective on the dichotomy of "us" and "them." This newspaper, which is closely associated with the New Order regime, positions the reformasi government as powerless in uncovering the May 1998 tragedy:

Reflecting on the series of "mystified" tragedies, does this meet the standards to call this a rule-of-law state? With the completeness of high state institutions and so many state tools to uphold the law, is it appropriate to claim this a modern state? [42].

In the reformasi era, Suara Karya classifies the state not as a provider of solutions but as part of the problem. This editorial subtly criticizes the reformasi government for failing to position itself as a modern state. Suara Karya provides an explanation for this in the following lines:

The nation's inability to manage itself and resolve major strategic issues is more due to transient political compromises among the power elite. The democratic spigot has been opened, and public aspirations have become tools of pressure. However, due to political compromises and power struggles, even public pressure becomes ineffective.

The editorial from Suara Karya justifies that the failure to fully disclose the May 1998 tragedy stems from the lack of will among the elite. There is no political will among the government officials. In other words, even though the elites are now in power due to the blood and tears of the victims and their families from the May 1998 events, they consider the victims and their families to be outside their group (out group), or "them." Thus, in its editorial, Suara Karya views the government (them) as part of the problem, in opposition to the victims and their families (us).

5 Conclusions

The editorial narratives surrounding the May 1998 riots, as depicted in Kompas, Republika, and Suara Karya, reveal a complex interplay of power, memory, and responsibility. The absence of terms such as "sexual violence," "rape," and "sexual assault" in their discussions indicates a reluctance to fully acknowledge the atrocities that occurred, reflecting a broader societal denial of these issues. While the concept of reformasi was initially associated with hope and progress, the subsequent editorial perspectives suggest a growing disillusionment with its outcomes, highlighting the persistence of corruption and the failure to address significant human rights violations. Moreover, the dichotomy of "us" versus "them" emerges prominently, positioning the government and the elite as part of the problem rather than the solution. This narrative framing serves to reinforce societal divisions and underscores the need for a more transparent and accountable approach to historical injustices. Ultimately, the editorial choices made by these newspapers reveal the power of language in shaping public discourse and memory, calling for a critical examination of the role of media in confronting uncomfortable truths about the past.

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