

# When Journalism Produces Horror Story: The Case of the INSENTIF Podcast by Tirto.id

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### Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji proses produksi konten horor pada podcast INSENTIF, yang merupakan bagian dari Tirto.id, salah satu media online di Indonesia. Ketika media jurnalistik terlibat dalam proses produksi konten hantu dan misteri, hal ini memunculkan kekhawatiran akan terabaikannya prinsip dasar jurnalistik, khususnya dalam hal menyajikan informasi yang terverifikasi. Guna memahami fenomena ini, peneliti melakukan studi kasus kualitatif dengan mewawancarai tiga informan kunci di podcast INSENTIF. Menggunakan teori strukturasi Giddens sebagai kerangka analisis, temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa tim produksi podcast INSENTIF masih memaknai rutinitas mereka sebagai bagian dari kerja jurnalistik. Dalam penulisan naskah podcast, mereka tetap mengandalkan sumber yang tepercaya serta memegang teguh disiplin verifikasi. Walaupun harus diakui, mereka membuat skenario fiktif pada bagian awal setiap episode podcast horor. Oleh karena itu, mereka selalu menyebutkan dengan jelas bahwa praktik jurnalistik mereka, yang berkenaan dengan episode horor, tidak sama dengan standar jurnalisme yang biasanya diterapkan Tirto.id. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa agen pada kasus ini cenderung mengikuti dan mereproduksi struktur yang sudah ada daripada menentang struktur tersebut.

Kata Kunci: horror story, online journalism, podcast, structuration

#### Abstract

This research aims to investigate the production of horror contents in the INSENTIF podcast channel by Tirto.id, an Indonesian online news media. When journalistic media are involved in the production of ghost stories and mystery, it raises concerns about journalistic basic principles of providing verified information. To understand this phenomenon, we conducted a qualitative case study and interviewed three key informants from the INSENTIF production team. Using Giddens' structuration theory as an analysis framework, we identify that the INSENTIF production crews still perceive their routine as part of journalistic works. In writing the script, they strive to rely on credible sources and actualise the discipline of verification although they admit that they insert some fictional horrific scenarios at the beginning of each episode as well. Thus, they mention a disclaimer, explaining that their journalism practice, specifically on horror episodes, is not the same as the regular Tirto.id's standard journalism. This research argues that the agents, in this case, seem to follow and reproduce the existing structure, rather than resist it.

**Keywords:** horror story, online journalism, podcast, structuration



#### INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the production of horror and mystery podcasts on the *INSENTIF* channel by *Tirto.id*, an Indonesian online news media. In most cases, ghost-related stories are produced by entertainment media enterprises. This type of story is mainly aimed at entertaining the audience by generating fear. However, when journalism media are involved in the production and distribution of ghost-and-mystery stories, it may raise an issue, particularly in journalistic basic principles. As mentioned by Kovach & Rosenstiel (2007) in *The Elements of Journalism*, the first commitment of journalism is to the truth and the essence of journalism is the discipline of verification. When it comes to producing mystery and ghost stories, the role of journalists in presenting verified information is called into doubt.

Long before podcasts became as ubiquitous as they are today, ghost stories, mysteries, and other supernatural tales have been produced in other forms of popular media, like novels, TV and radio shows, movies, YouTube videos, and so on. Hollywood, as the leading hub of major movie studios in the USA, already noticed this market and regularly released movies about it, such as *The Ring, The Nun, Sinister, The Conjuring, Annabelle*, and many more. Vorel (2017) mentioned that horror movies in the USA set a record in 2017 by generating \$1 billion at the box office. This implies a desire to consume horror and mystery contents. In the context of Indonesia, ghost-related movies started to shine in the early 1980s to 2000s (Windiasih, Suprihatini, & Lukmantoro, 2013). Suzanna was the most popular actress who played in nearly all Indonesian horror movies in the 1980s, like *Sundel Bolong* (1981), *Nyi Blorong* (1982), *Telaga Angker* (1984), and *Malam Jumat Kliwon* (1985). Further, Windiasih et al., (2013) pointed out that from 2009 to 2011, Indonesian horror movies were dominated by sexual and pornographic scenes. Aside from horror movies, various supernatural reality shows, such as *Dunia Lain* (Trans TV), *Karma* (ANTV), *Mister Tukul Jalan-Jalan* (Trans 7), and others, had debuted on Indonesian television screens.

Basically, studies on ghost-and-mystery stories in Indonesia are enormous but still majorly focused on movies and television programmes (Ayun, 2015; Downes, 2014; Herawati, 2011; Ismail & Wenerda, 2021; Karunianingsih, 2016; Larasati & Wahid, 2020; Lasty, 2020; Muthmainnah & Syas, 2020; Noer, 2021; Pangastuti, 2019; Permatasari & Widisanti, 2019; Wahid & Agustina, 2021; Windiasih et al., 2013). These studies mostly pay attention to how Indonesian horror movies commodify women's bodies and represent sensuality (Annissa & Adiprasetio, 2022; Ayun, 2015; Herawati, 2011; Karunianingsih, 2016; Larasati & Wahid, 2020; Pangastuti, 2019; Windiasih et al., 2013). For instance, Larasati & Wahid (2020) conducted a qualitative textual analysis of three Indonesian horror movies, specifically Terowongan Casablanca, Tali Pocong Perawan, and Air Terjun Pengantin. They found out that women's bodies are commodified through their outfits that exposed their sexy bodies, gestures that reflected their seductive lust, and scenes that expressed sexual desires. These findings are in line with Karunianingsih's (2016) study on an Indonesian horror movie, Pacar Hantu Perawan. She concluded that cinematic technique, such as type of shot and lighting, was used to exploit women's bodies in order to accentuate the male gaze and enhance visual outputs. To be more specific, Karunianingsih (2016) explained that those women in the movie were treated as visual objects by male audiences so they need to obey the logic of the male gaze through several camera techniques.

However, no investigation has yet been conducted to study the horror and mystery content from the perspective of Indonesian news media. All this time, the concern is more likely to highlight contents from entertainment media, particularly movies and television



programmes. In fact, there are some news media in Indonesia that produce horror and mystery products as part of their content, like *Tirto.id* through its *INSENTIF* podcast channel, *Tinggal Nama* podcast channel by Kompas Gramedia, *Malam Jumat* section in *Mojok*'s news website, and *Kumparan* through its exclusive channel named *Kumparan*+. Not to mention, articles about ghosts and supernatural contents also appear in a lot of Indonesian online news websites.

This study aimed to initially explore ghost-related content by taking the *INSENTIF* podcast channel as the case. Notably, the *INSENTIF* releases various themes of contents ranging from politics to pop culture. This includes some horror, mystery, supernatural, and ghost-related contents. Meanwhile, these kinds of information are considered to be exceptionally complex to verify the truth. Therefore, this research investigates why journalists in *Tirto.id* produce this theme on their podcast channel and how they perceive this practice.

Giddens' structuration theory will be used to analyse this phenomenon. Fundamentally, structuration is defined as the condition that controls the continuity or shift of structure as well as the reproduction of the social system (Giddens, 1984). West & Turner (2014) perceive structuration as the production, reproduction, and transformation of social systems through the use of resources and rules. Further, Giddens (1984) explained that social scientists need to look at the structure that serves as the foundation for a particular social group in order to understand its communication. In this sense, the structure is defined as the resources and rules used to keep the system afloat, while the system itself refers to the social group and its behaviours to achieve its objectives (West & Turner, 2014). In other words, structuration theory highlights the idea that human action is the source that produces and reproduces the social context in which they live.

Structuration theory highlights the integration of social agents and structure. Agents are people who engage in a particular behaviour or action. Littlejohn (2002) mentioned that structures, including norms, roles, relational expectations, and so on, shape and are shaped by social action that is performed by agents. In other words, agents are guided by rules provided by these structures, yet their actions could produce new rules or reproduce existing rules. Giddens referred to this as the duality of structure (Giddens, 1984). In explaining social action performed by agents, Giddens mentioned two important phrases: discursive consciousness and practical consciousness. Further, Giddens explained that discursive consciousness is the ability of agents to communicate their thoughts and explain their actions in a language. In other words, it is the knowledge that can be communicated to others through words. In comparison, actions and thoughts that cannot be expressed in words are referred to as practical consciousness (West & Turner, 2014).

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative case study with a constructivist paradigm. Stake (1995) defines a qualitative case study as an investigation of the uniqueness and complexity of a single case, leading to an understanding of its activity under significant conditions. The data of this research were primarily gathered from in-depth interviews with three key informants: Riva Rais as the programme director, Awal Hasan as the scriptwriter, and Uteng Iskandar as the marketing executive. The interviews were conducted remotely between March to May 2022. The in-depth interview becomes the primary data because the aim of this research is to understand the phenomenon of horror content production by *Tirto.id* as an Indonesian news media. This objective can only be answered if researchers interview the key informants from the production team. The data were then transcribed and analysed by using



an inductive approach. According to Gibson & Brown (2009), the inductive approach implied that the data were classified into several themes based on the data's commonalities, linkages, and contrasts. In addition, the researchers also gathered secondary data by listening to some horror podcast episodes. This is important for providing examples and validating what was mentioned by the informants.

#### RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Tirto.id is an Indonesian online news media that was established in 2016. According to its website, Tirto.id's journalistic practices are referred to as precision journalism. Meyer (in Sanusi, 2018) explained that precision journalism is the practice of approaching journalism as science, employing a scientific method, scientific objectivity, and scientific principles. Panjaitan (2018) mentioned that Tirto.id also implements long-form journalism with a narrative writing style. As a consequence, Tirto.id strives to deliver in-depth news articles backed by infographics and illustrations, in contrast to other online news media in Indonesia that produce short and immediate news articles (Ciptadi & Armando, 2018). This practice is consistent with their organisational philosophy of providing clear and in-depth information, as the name "Tirto" was derived from the word "tirta" which means "water" (Tirto.id, 2016).

## Adapt to the trend and format

In 2020, exactly the moment when the first COVID-19 wave hit the world, listening to podcasts became a trend among Indonesian adolescents. Nielsen (in Evandio, 2020) reports that podcast listeners in February 2020 grew by more than 3.6 million. Moreover, Spotify's Head of Studio for Southeast Asia (Evandio, 2021) mentions that in 2020, the number of podcast listeners in Indonesia has increased by triple. Along with this trend, *Tirto.id* then initiated its podcast channel, named *Podcast Tirto: INSENTIF*. According to Riva Rais, the programme director of the *INSENTIF*, this podcast channel was created as an attempt to keep up with the emerging trends of producing podcasts. Moreover, Awal Hasan, the scriptwriter, mentions that *INSENTIF* is perceived as a channel to extend the existence of *Tirto.id* in the form of audio, after previously existing in the form of articles, infographics, and videos.

Unlike the regular news articles on *Tirto.id*'s website that are more in-depth and factual, the *INSENTIF* contents are more convivial and milder. This happens because the production team seeks to adapt to the format of the podcast itself. Moreover, the *INSENTIF* podcast programme is not under the editorial division. Instead, the team works under the multimedia division that usually produces videos.

"There are only two things that differentiate this podcast channel with the other *Tirto*'s contents. First, it is in audio format. Second, the podcaster must deliver the contents by using a conversational language style. It is totally different from articles that use written language style." (Awal Hasan, 31 March 2022).

Apart from this fact, Riva Rais, the programme director, still defined their practices in producing the podcast as journalistic work. To be more specific, the *INSENTIF* team usually repacks the articles that already existed on *Tirto.id*'s news website. Riva said that despite the serious nature of the articles, it is their responsibility to polish them and make them more engaging by utilising conversational style. According to Uteng Iskandar, the marketing



executive of *Tirto.id*, this podcast channel is an effort to bring *Tirto.id* closer to Indonesian adolescents.

In addition to trivia, pop culture, history, and e-sports, INSENTIF also maintains a special segment named PERSAMI (*Perkemahan Selasa Misteri*, or Mystery Tuesday Camp). As the name implies, PERSAMI is regularly uploaded every Tuesday. Its contents range from Indonesian ghost mythologies, crime, sadistic history, unsolved mystery, and other dark stories with supporting horrific sound effects. For example, when the podcaster tells a scene that occurred in the jungle, the sound editor inserts some sound effects such as an owl's hoot, crickets, and so on. These sound effects aim to help the creation of the theatre of mind since podcasts rely solely on voice.

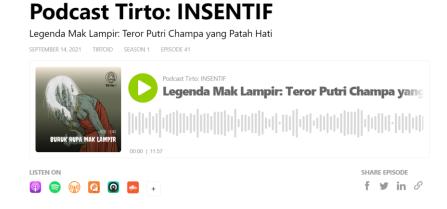


Figure 1. Horror episodes in the INSENTIF podcast channel.

According to Awal Hasal, the idea of producing PERSAMI emerged when they were brainstorming new themes for their podcast channel. PERSAMI was then created as an attempt to offer more flexible and unrestricted content that matches the preference of Indonesian podcast listeners. Awal mentioned that this kind of content receives a lot of attention. As an example, he refers to Nessie Judge's YouTube channel which has 9.24 million subscribers. Nessie Judge is the most iconic Indonesian content creator who entertains her audiences with horror stories and dark conspiracy theories.

Riva agreed with Awal and claimed that horror-themed contents are supposed to be high in demand. When compared to the other themes on the INSENTIF channel, PERSAMI is regarded to be the most favourite one. By this consideration, they insist on preserving the production of PERSAMI in their podcast channel. Riva highlighted, "Sometimes if we are too idealistic, we can lose to competitors."

#### Journalism with a disclaimer

As part of journalism, INSENTIF is expected to deliver information that not only entertains but also educates the audience. According to Riva, although the essence of PERSAMI is telling ghosts, crime, supernatural, and dark stories, they still attempt to deliver some educational information, like the background of a particular event, the history, the social analysis, or the moral value. This principle is brought into practice by Awal, who is assigned to write the scripts for PERSAMI. According to Awal, this role matches his interest because he enjoys watching crime documentaries and reading urban legends.



When it comes to writing the scripts, Awal mentioned that he always referred to credible sources, especially in writing crime cases or sadistic history that is based on factual events. An episode titled "Horor Holodomor: Kelaparan Massal di Ukraina Akibat Ulah Uni Soviet" (Holodomor Horror: Mass Famine in Ukraine by the Soviet Union) can be a good example to illustrate how PERSAMI seeks to incorporate historical information into their horror storytelling. In addition to recounting the story of cannibalism, conflict, and genocide in Ukraine which is known as the tragedy of Holodomor, the podcaster also mentioned the historical and political context and its relevance to the current situation in Ukraine.

However, Awal admitted that he also created fictional storylines to illustrate the information he wanted to deliver and stimulated the audience's imagination. As a case in point, an episode titled "Misteri Nyi Roro Kidul: Siapakah Ia Sang Penguasa Laut Selatan?" (The Mystery of Nyi Roro Kidul: Who is the Lord of the South Sea?) can exemplify the integration of both fictional storylines and the verified historical background of the figure of Nyi Roro Kidul. The episode started with a dramatic monologue and then followed by an explanation from a different podcaster.



Figure 2. The episode of "Misteri Nyi Roro Kidul: Siapakah Ia Sang Penguasa Laut Selatan?"

The monologue was about a man who had just broken up with his girlfriend. To refresh his mind, the man went to Parangtritis Beach, the iconic site in Yogyakarta which is believed to be Nyi Roro Kidul's territory. The man mentioned that he met a beautiful woman on the beach named Rara. On the following day, he decided to meet up again with Rara. Surprisingly, at around 8 p.m., Rara showed up riding a chariot. The sound effect of the horse's hooves and the chime of the chariot's bell could be heard clearly to support the storyline. Rara persuaded him to join her in her chariot. The two of them then rode away together. The following week, the local authority announced the discovery of a man's corpse at one of Parangtritis Beach's corners.

The above storyline is just a bridging to the main explanation of the mythology of Nyi Roro Kidul which is based on Indonesian history books, such as Sejarah Indonesia Modern 1200-2008 (Modern Indonesian History 1200-2008) by Prof. Merle Calvin Ricklefs and Jawa-Islam di Masa Kolonial (Java-Islam in the Colonial Period) by Prof. Nancy K. Florida. At the end of the explanation, the podcaster mentioned that until today, some Javanese communities still perform some traditional rituals to pay tribute to the figure of Nyi Roro Kidul. This is



done to inform the audience that the legend of Nyi Roro Kidul is not just fiction, but a surviving superstition among the society and has become part of Indonesian traditional heritage.

Social reflection as well as the moral value of the story usually appear at the end of each episode. For instance, an episode titled "Mitologi Pesugihan Dewi Lanjar, Penguasa Laut Utara Jawa" (The Mythology of Pesugihan Dewi Lanjar, the Ruler of the North Sea of Java) provides another example of how they tell a social reflection of the Indonesian society that still believes in pesugihan, a ritual to forge a deal demons in an attempt to obtain wealth. This episode criticises those who believe in this ritual and mentions that they are even willing to sacrifice their loved ones for the purpose of being rich.

As a result of the hybridisation of the fictional storyline and verified source of information, Riva said that they must provide a disclaimer at the very beginning of each PERSAMI episode. Awal asserted that this disclaimer is very important since they still work in the framework of journalism and under the name of *Tirto.id*.

"We have a unique style of journalism that is only applicable to PERSAMI. That's why we disclaim that PERSAMI is not the same as the other *Tirto*'s journalistic works. PERSAMI is neither investigative journalism nor data journalism. PERSAMI is 'jurnalisme bukan-bukan' (diverting journalism)." (Awal Hasan, 31 March 2022)

"We don't want our audience to just listen and think that it is diverting. We want to give them something, a value. If they weren't aware of it before, we hope that after listening to our channel, they will be aware and excited to discuss it more in the comments section." (Riva Rais, 16 April 2022)

Most importantly, because they perceive this practice as part of journalism, they also perform the discipline of verification. According to Riva, before producing a PERSAMI episode, they always work together to proofread the scripts. This is done to anticipate the misinformation and maintain the quality of each content they deliver. "Awal is disciplined in selecting the source of information. He always writes the source on the scripts so it is easier for us to verify the information," Riva explained. He mentioned that he has trusted Awal as a scriptwriter. However, as a journalist, he should be sceptical about every piece of information he receives. Thus, when he finds inaccurate information, he always asks Awal to revise or take out a particular part.

# In the middle of idealism and commercialism

Uteng explained that the media industry is both a business institution and a press institution. Therefore, in addition to serving information and performing the watchdog role in society, *Tirto.id* also strives to obtain income from advertisements to sustain the organisation. Before the *INSENTIF* channel was established, Uteng usually offered advertisers advertorial articles, infographics, digital banners, and social media contents. Since *INSENTIF* was initiated, the podcast channel has become part of the offering.



In the context of the *INSENTIF* podcast channel, advertising appears in the form of ad libs between the introduction part and the explanation part. Additionally, Uteng mentioned that they will be very welcome if their clients decide to produce native advertising that takes the form of a whole regular podcast episode. In other words, they will be very flexible in adjusting the needs of their clients with any forms of advertising.

However, Uteng said that while the *INSENTIF* channel is still in its early stages, they have just recently acquired a few advertisers. Therefore, Uteng mentioned that he usually includes *INSENTIF* into several marketing bundlings in order to boost clients' enthusiasm to utilise this podcast channel. Nevertheless, specifically for the PERSAMI episode, they are still struggling to acquire clients since some advertisers need to synchronise the product placement with the podcast episode that relates to their brand identity. In the case of PERSAMI, although it receives the highest number of listeners, its horror theme is not really suitable for many brands.

How *INSENTIF* seeks to comply with the market is also reflected in the process of selecting topics for each episode. Awal acknowledged that he sometimes refers to issues that become public conversations when writing the script. An episode that discussed a horror phenomenon in Ukraine could be one of the examples. That episode was launched at the moment when Russia launched military attacks on Ukraine. According to Awal, this strategy is aimed at making PERSAMI contents more relevant to the audience.

Responding to the competitive media industry, Riva highlighted that the most important element for them is trying to be consistent at this initial stage. From consistency, Riva expected that the *INSENTIF* channel would grow bigger and attract more advertisers, although he admitted that the process of getting to that phase is not a piece of cake. He asserted that they still commit to producing quality contents that go in line with *Tirto.id*'s values. This finding is in line with the finding of Ciptadi & Armando (2018). They revealed that the advertisement is not *Tirto.id*'s priority. Ciptadi & Armando (2018) mentioned that, unlike *Tirto.id*, most other online news media tend to produce brief, immediate, and sensational articles to attract more viewers. By doing so, those media institutions could generate more traffic that entices the advertisers even if this practice may break the principles of journalism. Nevertheless, Riva in this case said that he also welcomes any attempts done by the marketing division to boost up a particular content for commercial purposes. Therefore, the researchers perceive that the *INSENTIF* channel is standing in the middle of preserving *Tirto.id*'s idealism and following commercial needs.

# Horror productions under the framework of Giddens' structuration theory

The production of horror content in the *INSENTIF* podcast channel could be analysed from the perspective of Giddens' structuration theory. In particular, this theory discusses the production, reproduction, and transformation of social systems (West & Turner, 2014). Within the context of this study, the system refers to the production of horror contents by the media industry in Indonesia. The system maintains a structure that incorporates rules and resources geared at attaining goals.

Rules here allude to the fact that horror genres have become the preference of most Indonesian media consumers. This is supported by the data from Spotify's Head of Studio for Southeast Asia which mentioned that in addition to comedy, horror has become the most popular genre among Indonesian podcast listeners (Zhafira, 2021). Moreover, according to



Pusparisa (2019), when compared to other movies created between 2008 and 2019, a horror movie titled *Suzzanna: Bernapas dalam Kubur (Suzzanna: Buried Alive)* achieved the highest revenue. Another horror movie, *Pengabdi Setan (Satan's Slave)*, stands in fifth place. Ayun (2015) mentioned that horror films have become a favourite among Indonesian audiences since Indonesian society has a strong connection to the supernatural. She argued that this is the reason why some Indonesian producers keep reproducing horror movies. When discussing resources, those refer to supporting media that can be utilised to perform power (Giddens, 1984). In this context, those are the technological resources, like sound editing tools, recorders, the internet, and so on.

According to Giddens, the structure may restrict how agents act in a system. However, agents can also decide whether or not to follow the structure. Giddens describes this as the duality of structure (Giddens, 1984). In the case of the *INSENTIF* podcast channel, the idea of producing PERSAMI horror episodes came after the other themes had already been established. In other words, at the beginning of its initiation, *Tirto.id*'s podcast channel did not aim to specifically produce horror content. The production crews, who are considered as agents, have the ability to choose whether or not to follow the system.

As personalities who work under news media organization, the agents may decide not to produce horror contents that are assumed to be unreliable as journalistic works. However, after researching the trend and evaluating traffic, the agents decided to follow the existing system. They prefer producing horror content since it matches Indonesian market preferences. But, in doing so, they still strive to uphold the journalistic principles of providing verified information. The researchers assume that at this phase, the agents have developed discursive consciousness since they can communicate their considerations in words. They can provide consideration why they keep producing horror contents. Unlike earlier findings that point out the attempt of *Tirto.id* to resist the structure of producing brief, immediate, and sensational news articles that are routinely practised by other online news media (Ciptadi & Armando, 2018), this research argues that in the case of producing horror podcast episodes, *Tirto.id* through its *INSENTIF* podcast channel tends to preserve the structure of producing horror content that is normally practised in the media industry.

### **CONCLUSION**

This research reveals how the *INSENTIF* podcast channel by *Tirto.id* preserves the structure of producing horror content in the media industry. Since horror is considered as the most favourite genre among Indonesian podcast listeners, the agents decide to reproduce the system. Despite this, the agents still uphold the principle of journalism to provide reliable information. They still refer to credible sources, although in reality they combine the information with fictional scenarios at the beginning of each episode. Therefore, realising that their works are a hybrid form of fiction and educational information, they clearly mention a disclaimer which explains that the journalism practice in their horror episodes is neither data journalism nor investigative journalism but a "jurnalisme bukan-bukan" (diverting journalism). This research argues that on one side, the *INSENTIF* podcast channel still carries on the principle of journalism, but on the other side, it still accommodates the preferences of consuming horror stories. This study contributes to enriching the discussion of horror contents production in the media industry from the perspective of news media institutions. When journalists are involved in the production of horror stories, they not only intend to entertain the audience but also to educate.



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