

# Women Reading Popular Press: an Analysis of Merapi and Pos Kota readers

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## Abstract

This research examines how women read the popular press. The main question of this research is to what extent the popular press has relevance and functional values for women readers? The study was conducted on the readers of two popular newspapers in Indonesia, Merapi in Yogyakarta and Pos Kota in Jakarta. Through in-depth interviews, the study found that women have a pleasure of reading popular press because of its relevance and functionality. Although most of the news tells about crime and violence, those themes are relevant and functional for their daily life. The informants read almost all the criminal news. According to them, the criminal news provide information about what is happening in their environment so that they can always be careful, mainly related to the supervision of their children. In contrast, women do not particularly like political news because it is irrelevant to their life. In this case, political news is considered as male domain. The cultural factors also provide relevance for women readers, especially Merapi. The women who read Merapi very enjoy reading mystery stories, *Jagad Lelembut*, which is closely related to their local culture contexts.

**Keywords:** *popular press; women readers; Pos Kota; Merapi; relevance; functionality.*

## 1. Introduction

In *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (Indonesian edition published in 2003), Strinati has given very interesting comments on how popular culture is addressed, especially for the middle and intellectual class. According to Strinati (2003), in a certain measure, consumption of popular culture by ordinary people has always been seen as a problem for “others”, both intellectuals, political leaders, or moral reformers. Popular culture does not contain useful things except peddling something of low value. In his study of popular culture in Indonesia, Heryanto (2015) confirm Strinati’s view, “for various reasons, both political, moral and ideological, pop culture is often underestimated.” In other words, pop culture often seen as source of cultural damage.

The consumption of popular press (Storey 2008, Fiske 2011, Conboy 2002) is an interesting problem as stated by Strinati and Heryanto. The observation of Siegel (2000) in his study of Pos Kota provided a very clear illustration of this matter, “This newspaper is unique among various newspapers in Jakarta not only because of its attractiveness to the lower class, but also because it is a source of shame for the Indonesian middle class who are caught read it.”

The subjects of this study are female readers. In Indonesia, previous studies about popular culture and especially popular press have been widely carried out (Hobson 2011, Ida 2012, Yusuf 2009, Rahmitasari 2013, Saraswati 2006). However, the study on how women read popular press is still rare. The contents of popular press are dominated by scandal and

criminal news, a typical of masculine world. Thus, it is very interesting to know how they read the popular press.

## 2. Relevance and productivity of popular press

Fiske (2011) argued that people build discrimination between the products of cultural industries, choose some and reject others in processes that often shocking industry. This is often controlled by the social conditions of audiences. Therefore, popular discrimination is very different from critical or aesthetic discrimination which is developed to judge the strength of high-quality texts. According to Fiske (2011), popular discrimination pays attention to functionality rather than quality because it places potential text used in daily life.

Fiske's ideas about discrimination and functionality would be relevant for this study to see how women read popular press. Among the existing newspapers, Pos Kota and Merapi, apart from categorizing them as low quality press, are still chosen as reading materials. However, only some articles or rubrics were read by these readers. Informants of this study enjoyed almost all criminal news, but read only occasionally political or sports news. According to them, political and sports news are masculine domain, and become a pleasure for men, as described in the following quotation.

*I read from the headline and then read the next page to continue this news. For example, I read news because it was popular, for instance Ahok's trial. Ah, I will read this articles! National news at a glance. I just want to know what happened. So, we know about political issues in national level. I didn't read and follow rubric of Aspiration. But if there is a really big photo on the bottom, I will read at soon. I will read articles in Rubric Jakarta Raya from the title first. If there is something interesting, then I will continue reading it. If there is "anget" [actual news], for instance, Ahok and Rizyiq Shibab, I will read it immediately. We never read advertisement because no one can buy [laughs]. Artist news, like Nazar quarreled with Dewi Persik, I always read.*

This quotation shows that the actuality is the main reason why they read political news. Hence, Pos Kota's readers only read political

news as far as it is related to Jakarta or being widely discussed, while national-scale political news is only read at a glance. Meanwhile, readers of Merapi, beside enjoy criminal news, they also like "klenik" or mystical stories and traditional medicine. They do not really like political and sports news.

The relevance of popular texts for women readers of Pos Kota and Merapi is closely related to their social and cultural context. As stated by Merapi readers, they like criminal news at Merapi because criminality were close to their life. Ismi, for example, said, "Criminality is happening around us. So, we want to know how this criminal happened?" However, the main reason is actually not only the closeness of crime in their life, but the functionality of the criminal news in their daily life. Functionality in this sense closes to the uses and gratifications tradition (Grosberg et al. 2006, Lull 2000), but the functionality must be seen in their socio-cultural context and social class. Reading criminal news gives the informants information and provision for social control.

*Yes, certainly more aware. There was a motorcycle theft in this place. At 5 am, in the boarding house, in front of Mr. RT's house. There were two men passing in front of my house with two motorbikes. They speed up. In the afternoon, there was a missing motorcycle news [in Pos Kota].*

For the readers of Pos Kota and Merapi, reading criminal news not only satisfies their curiosity of the criminal reality in their life, but importantly gives the references to protect their children. In fact, it can be said that these women reading criminal news not only for their pleasures or just for fulfilling their curiosity, but for the sake of getting protection materials for their young children. It confirms Fiske (2011) who has argued that reading popular press is related to the relevance and productivity for their readers.

## 3. Mystical stories and the cultural contexts of Merapi readers

For the women readers of Merapi, reading the mystical or mystery stories is a pleasure because it gives stories of "something else", the supernatural world. It is coincided with the stories from their friends or neighbors or their direct experiences. It is related to the cultural

contexts of Yogyakarta, a city in which ‘mystical aura’ seems to be much stronger than another cities in Java. For example, the three-points narrative, the Yogyakarta Palace, Parangtritis Beach, and Mount Merapi, is a signifier of how the mystical culture still exist in Yogyakarta, coexist with modern rationality and capitalism.

This kind of mystical belief is also confirmed in the interviews with the readers of Merapi, why they like the story of supernatural world in Merapi press. One informant argued, *“Jagad Lelembut” was indeed Java because it turned out that in another place [another newspaper] was not there. Merapi always present “Jagad Lelembut” [supernatural story], and also herbs. Furthermore, she also said, “Merapi is mystical. There are many mystical expressions such as Jagad Lelembut and the Horoscope of Java.”*

This research found a constant interest in reading occult rubric, namely “Jagad Lelembut”. This interest is not only a matter of making invisible to be visible, but also related to personal experience. One of the Merapi readers even claimed that she often communicates with supernatural spirits in her daily life. She has mystical experiences that encourages her to read “Jagad Lelembut” continually.

*I also like “Jagad Lembut”. Something seems impossible would be presented in the real sense in “Jagad Lelembut”. Oh, the story of my friend about supranatural really exist. Therefore, “Jagad Lelembut” really makes curious because even though [for myself] often experienced it, but the stories are various. So, it is still remain a mystery and interesting.*

For the readers, criminal and mystery stories have been trademark for Merapi newspapers. Merapi newspapers is not a serious newspapers read by highly educated people. Its contents are criminals, supernatural, horoscope, daily problems of ordinary people, micro problems that may be considered trivial, and not useful for upper middle class society.

These findings confirm Williams’ thesis (1962; quoted by Lull 2000) that culture is “a particular way of life”, which is shared among members of the community and determined by values, traditions, beliefs, material objects, and territories. In this perspective, culture is a complex and dynamic environment of people or society, including things, world views, rituals, and daily activities. Culture concerns how we speak, how we dress, how we eat, how we share space and time, how we socialize to children, and so on. In other words, culture is the totality of the human way of life, creates the boundaries of its territory, and therefore distinguishes itself from others. As such, referring to Lull (2000), culture is “our way of doing things”, and this is in the form of “who we are and who we are not”.

#### 4. Conclusion

This research focused on women readers of Merapi and Pos Kota, two popular newspapers in Indonesia. This study concluded that reading popular press such as Merapi and Pos Kota provides relevance to the readers. This study found that women read almost all the criminal news, because it provides information about what is happening in their environment so that they would always be careful, mainly related to the supervision of their children. For them, criminal news functions for daily monitoring, especially to protect their children. In contrast, women do not particularly like political news because it is irrelevant to their life. In this case, political news is considered as male domain. Thus, women have a pleasure of reading popular press because of its relevance and functionality.

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