

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background of the Study

As digital natives, younger generations today are highly reliant on smartphones and social media for their news consumption. According to the 2019 Digital News Report by Reuters Institute, 43 percent of Gen Y and 57 percent of Gen Z open social media applications when they pick up their smartphones to look up the news first thing in the morning (Kalogeropoulos, 2019). However, those who mainly rely on social media to get their news are less likely to get their facts straight about major issues like the epidemics and politics and tend to be less knowledgeable about these issues in comparison to those who rely on different sources like news websites, print, and cable TV (Mitchell et al., 2020). Moreover, a 2018 research by the Science Journal discovered that false news spread much faster than the truth online; the top one percent of false news spread easily to between 1000 and 100,000 people, whereas valid information seldomly reach more than 1000 people (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, 2018). The proliferation of misinformation online is especially concerning during times of crisis like a global health pandemic.

On March 11<sup>th</sup> 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) formally declared the outbreak of the novel coronavirus known as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) or Covid-19 as a pandemic (“WHO Director General’s opening remarks”, 2020). Eight months later, the

number of reported cases worldwide had surpassed 50 million and the number of reported deaths reached more than a million (“COVID-19 situation update”, 2020). In Indonesia alone, the total number of reported infections was 474,455 with a death toll of 15,393 and 398,636 recovered patients as of November 17 (“Indonesia’s latest official COVID-19 figures”, 2020). Unfortunately, the increase in the number of Covid-19 cases is also accompanied by the spread of misinformation.

Like many countries in the world, Indonesia is fighting two battles, which are the Covid-19 pandemic and the “infodemic” of misinformation. The WHO defines the infodemic as the overabundance of information online and offline; this phenomenon allows false news to spread without control and disrupt the efficacy of the public health response of governments (“Managing the COVID-19 infodemic”, 2020). According to the Minister of Communications and Information Technology Johnny G. Plate, the infodemic endangers lives, results in chaos and disharmony in society, and becomes a hindrance towards online journalism (“*Menkominfo Ingatkan Disinfodemic*”, 2020).

A prominent form of misinformation are conspiracy theories, which are “attempts to explain the ultimate cause of significant and social and political events as secret plots by two or more powerful actors rather than as overt activities and natural occurrences” (Douglas et al. 2019, p. 4). A study by the American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene reported that over 2000 rumours and conspiracy theories flourished throughout the coronavirus pandemic; in fact, the myth that consuming alcohol could kill the coronavirus was linked

with 5,900 hospitalizations, 800 deaths and 60 cases of blindness caused by methanol poisoning (Rettner, 2020). The study also discovered that most of the Covid-19 rumors and conspiracy theories that were identified on online platforms came from India, the United States, China, Spain, Brazil, and Indonesia.

The relationship between the proliferation of conspiracy theories and times of crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic has been empirically confirmed. Conspiracy theories are more likely to appear during tragic and disastrous events like natural disasters, economic downturns, epidemics, and wars (McCauley and Jacques, 1979). Conspiratorial thinking can become popular during threatening circumstances because it alleviates the feeling of powerlessness, serves as a coping mechanism to make sense of uncertain events by blaming them on a set of conspirators, and allows people to dispute mainstream narratives (Lewandowsky and Cook, 2020). Furthermore, social media can exacerbate the spread of conspiracy theories because traditional gatekeepers cannot keep up with the constant flow of information online; in fact, a recent study on tweets about the Zika virus discovered that the number of propagators of conspiracy theories was more than double than that of fact-checkers debunking those theories (Wood, 2018).

## **1.2. Identification of the Problem**

The spread of conspiracy theories is perpetuated not only by ordinary Internet users but also a number of high-profile individuals who have large social media followings. In recent months, international celebrities such as Lewis

Hamilton, John Cusack, Wiz Khalifa, and Woody Harrelson promoted the false claim that the Covid-19 pandemic is linked with 5G technology; several Indonesian celebrities have also become controversial for promoting or endorsing conspiracy theories and unproven claims about the Covid-19 pandemic (Putri, 2020). The actress Luna Maya received backlash after she published a video interviewing a veterinary physician named drh. Moh Indro Cahyono who suggested that Covid-19 isn't as dangerous and deadly as people claimed, and that no patients actually died solely because of the virus; in response, the Executive Board of the Indonesian Veterinary Doctors Association stated that Cahyono's claims were his own personal beliefs and not representative of the association (Dwianto, 2020). The musician I Gede Ari Astina, also known as Jerinx, was convicted three years in prison for spreading conspiracy theories regarded as defamatory towards the Indonesian Medical Association; in an Instagram post Jerinx accused association and hospitals as the '*kacung*' or flunkeys of the World Health Organization (Dharmastuti, 2020).

The phenomenon wherein public figures like celebrities and politicians spread misinformation and conspiracy theories on social media have been studied by researchers Axel Burns and Timothy Graham from Queensland University of Technology who referred to those public figures as 'super spreaders'. According to Burns and Graham, conspiracy theories "gain huge spikes when people with large social media followings grab the misinformation and give them prominence" (Brewer, 2020). Thus the proliferation of conspiracy theories can gain significant

momentum in the mainstream with the endorsement of influential celebrities on social media.

To better understand this ‘super-spreaders’ phenomenon taking place in Indonesia on social media from the standpoint of communication science, the researcher analyzes the discourse of Covid-19 conspiracy theories by television presenter Deddy Corbuzier and his interview guests on his podcast series that is available on YouTube. The researcher conducts this study to provide preliminary knowledge for future studies on identifying and analyzing text or discourse that consist of conspiracy theories. According to research in psychology, conspiracy theories are rooted in two attitudes, “one cognitive and one motivational: namely fallacies in reasoning on the one hand and certain emotional attitudes and personality traits on the other. Together they constitute the conspiracy mentality” (Hubl, 2020). This research mainly focuses on the cognitive attitude, because fallacies in reasoning can be directly observed from the statements and claims made by Corbuzier and his guests in their discourse.

Thus the researcher must critically analyze the various elements of the discourse or text such as the organization of ideas, sentence forms, and word choice to provide a comprehensive picture of how Corbuzier and his interview guests constructs the meaning that the Covid-19 pandemic is a conspiracy. Consequently, the researcher chooses to use Teun A. van Dijk’s critical discourse analysis model which dissects a text into three dimensions: macrostructure, superstructure, and microstructure.

### **1.3. Statement of the Problem**

Based on the study background and problem identification explained above, the question the researcher seeks to answer is as follows:

How is the discourse about Covid-19 conspiracy theories being portrayed in the “Close the Door Podcast” on Deddy Corbuzier’s YouTube channel?

### **1.4. Purpose of the Study**

The research aims to describe and analyze the discourse in regards to how Deddy Corbuzier discusses COVID-19 conspiracy theories with his interview guests using the discourse analysis research method.

### **1.5. Significance of the Study**

#### **1.5.1. Significance on Academic Field**

On an academic level, this research will serve as a preliminary qualitative study on the discourse of conspiracy theories on social media that is lacking in the field of communication science. Moreover, it can become a reference for future quantitative study on the influence of public figures spreading conspiracy theories online towards Indonesian people.

#### **1.5.2. Significance on Practical Field**

On a practical level, this research can provide readers with insight on how to critically identify and evaluate conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation that they encounter on social media. The researcher hopes this study helps raise awareness of the importance of digital media literacy in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic so that readers



can better distinguish facts from hoaxes and avoid spreading misinformation online.

## **1.6 Organization of Study**

### **I. Introduction**

This chapter provides a brief explanation about the main issue and goal of this research. It gives background information that will help readers become familiar with the topic. It consists of research background, problem identification, statement of problem, significance of study, and organization of study.

### **II. Research Object**

This chapter describes the object and subject of this research. It will explain Deddy Corbuzier's YouTube channel and the background information of his interview guests.

### **III. Literature Review**

This chapter provides a comprehensive explanation of the theoretical framework and conceptual framework that will be applied in this research.

### **IV. Methodology**

The chapter describes the methods and techniques the researcher will use to collect, analyze, and test the validity of the data of this research.

### **V. Research Findings and Discussion**

This chapter consists of the research findings collected with the methods and techniques as explained in chapter four, as well as data analysis conducted using the theories and concepts as explained in chapter three. The result of the

findings and analysis will provide detailed information that answers the research question found in chapter one.

## **VI. Conclusion and Suggestion**

The chapter summarizes the most significant results of this research, and it provides advice and recommendations for future studies on similar topics.

