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NEWS ACCURACY CONSTRUCTION BASED ON FOUR FACTS: A JOURNALISTIC FORENSICS STUDY ON THE PRESIDENT JOKO WIDODO'S DIPLOMA CONTROVERSY

KONSTRUKSI AKURASI BERITA BERDASARKAN EMPAT FAKTA: STUDI FORENSIK JURNALISTIK MENGENAI KONTROVERSI IJAZAH PRESIDEN JOKO WIDODO

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Abstract

This study examines the construction of news accuracy based on four facts—empirical, public, psychological, and opinion as formulated by Zulkarnain Hamson in Forensic Journalism: Dissecting News Facts (Z Hamson, 2023a), applying this framework to the controversy surrounding the diploma of the 7th President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo (2024–2026). Using a qualitative-descriptive approach and content analysis techniques, this study analyzes how the completeness of the four facts in journalistic reporting determines accuracy, balance, and the weight of news in the era of disinformation. The findings show that (1) the empirical fact in this case was highly verified through forensic laboratory testing by Polri's Forensic Laboratory (Puslabfor); (2) the public fact reveals polarization that persists despite forensic verification; (3) the psychological fact is manifested through the direct expressions of Joko Widodo, the complainants, and alumni of Gadjah Mada University; and (4) the opinion fact appears in the form of expert, experiential, and mandatory opinions that enrich perspective. The main finding: the completeness of the four facts, arranged with logical coherence, produces news that is accurate, contextual, humanistic, and critical, while the absence of one or more facts results in biased and potentially misleading reporting.

Keywords : Forensic Journalism, Four News Facts, Empirical Fact, Public Fact, Psychological Fact, Opinion Fact, News Accuracy, Joko Widodo's Diploma.

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Abstrak

Studi ini mengkaji konstruksi akurasi berita berdasarkan empat jenis fakta fakta empiris, fakta publik, fakta psikologis, dan fakta opini sebagaimana dirumuskan oleh Zulkarnain Hamson dalam Forensic Journalism: Dissecting News Facts (Z. Hamson, 2023a). Kerangka kerja ini diterapkan pada kontroversi seputar ijazah Presiden ke-7 Indonesia, Joko Widodo (2024–2026). Dengan menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif-kualitatif serta teknik analisis konten, studi ini menganalisis bagaimana kelengkapan keempat fakta tersebut dalam pemberitaan jurnalistik menentukan akurasi, keseimbangan, dan bobot suatu berita di era disinformasi. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa: (1) fakta empiris dalam kasus ini telah diverifikasi secara mendalam melalui pengujian laboratorium forensik oleh Pusat Laboratorium Forensik (Puslabfor) Polri; (2) fakta publik memperlihatkan polarisasi yang tetap bertahan meskipun verifikasi forensik telah dilakukan; (3) fakta psikologis tercermin melalui pernyataan langsung dari Joko Widodo, pihak pelapor, serta para alumni Universitas Gadjah Mada; dan (4) fakta opini muncul dalam bentuk pendapat ahli, pendapat berdasarkan pengalaman, serta pendapat yang bersifat wajib (mandatori), yang memperkaya perspektif. Temuan utamanya adalah bahwa kelengkapan keempat fakta tersebut, yang disusun dengan koherensi logis, menghasilkan berita yang akurat, kontekstual, humanistik, dan kritis; sebaliknya, absennya satu atau lebih fakta tersebut akan menghasilkan pemberitaan yang bias dan berpotensi menyesatkan.

Kata Kunci : Jurnalisme Forensik, Empat Fakta Berita, Fakta Empiris, Fakta Publik, Fakta Psikologis, Fakta Opini, Akurasi Berita, Ijazah Joko Widodo.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background

The era of alternative facts has fundamentally transformed the landscape of journalism. Fake news spreads widely across social media networks, impacting social, economic, political, democratic, and governmental life (Z Hamson, 2023a). Amid these conditions, journalists are required to dissect facts in depth using rigorous methods, similar to how forensic experts handle evidence in the legal domain.

Hamson (Z Hamson, 2019a) formulates that news is built upon four facts: empirical fact, public fact, psychological fact, and opinion fact. The completeness of using all four facts elevates the quality of news from the perspective of informational accuracy. If a reporter relies on only one or two facts, the news becomes less substantive or risks inaccuracy (Z Hamson, 2020a).

The controversy over Joko Widodo's diploma (2024–2026) is a highly representative case study for testing the four-fact framework. This case involves: (a) scientific forensic verification by Polri's National Criminal Police (Bareskrim); (b) a collectively divided public response; (c) psychological impacts on all parties involved; and (d) a diversity of opinions from legal experts, alumni, and public officials. This case also demonstrates that verified empirical facts do not automatically erase public facts (public perception) a finding with significant implications for journalistic practice.

Research Questions

1. How are the four facts (empirical, public, psychological, opinion) manifested in the reporting of Joko Widodo's diploma case?;
2. How does the logical sequence among the four facts determine news accuracy and balance?;
3. What are the practical implications of the four-fact framework for improving the accuracy of journalistic reporting in the era of disinformation?

Research Objectives

1. To identify and analyze the manifestation of the four facts in the reporting of Joko Widodo's diploma case;
2. To analyze the logical relationships among the four facts in news construction;
3. To formulate practical implications for improving the accuracy of journalistic reporting.

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Significance of the Study

This study provides a theoretical contribution in the form of the empirical application of the Forensic Journalism framework to a real case, as well as a practical contribution in the form of a guide for journalists in constructing accurate and balanced news on cases involving public polarization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Facts in News

Facts in news are like "blood" in the human body (Z Hamson, 2023a). Facts are objective and can be identified in three forms: (a) physical objects, (b) opinions/arguments, and (c) situations and conditions. Facts are all results of five-sense observation of objective situations and conditions.

Hamson (2023) identifies four types of fake news: total fake news, distorted fake news, speed news, and sensationalist journalism. These four types constitute the main threats to news accuracy in the digital era.

Empirical Fact

Empirical fact refers to findings obtained through direct observation or investigation by the journalist. It serves as the primary foundation for accurate news reports because it is based on tangible evidence. In journalistic knowledge, empirical facts also derive from laboratory research, long-term and measurable observation, and data from official government agencies or NGOs (Z Hamson, 2023a).

Key characteristics:

a. Can be seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled (sensory verification);
b. Constitutes an event that genuinely occurred, with clear witnesses, time, and place;
c. Can be cross-checked for truth;
d. A posteriori in nature, obtained through experience and evidence.

Public Fact

Public fact is a record of events revealed through the testimony of many people, with a representative degree (Z Hamson, 2023a). It is obtained by journalists from their dense engagement with news sources when at the scene of an event. Public discourse as a news source forms the core of public fact.

Key characteristics:

a. Collective in nature (not single testimony);
b. Has representativeness regarding social conditions;
c. Can take the form of official statements by public figures, statistical data from trusted institutions, or events widely recorded;
d. Still requires re-verification to ensure validity.

Psychological Fact

Psychological fact is understood as individuals, whether individually or collectively, who experience and feel the psychological (mental) impact of an event (Z Hamson, 2023a). When an individual expresses their inner state (feelings) to a journalist, that expression is categorized as a psychological fact. In other words: a traumatic expression of an event.

Key characteristics:

a. Can only originate from someone who directly experienced the event;
b. Those who did not directly experience it cannot serve as sources of psychological fact, only as sources of opinion fact (lower quality of information);
c. References perspectives from psychological theory and legal science;
d. Provides emotional and contextual dimensions to news.

Opinion Fact

Opinion fact differs from a journalist's opinion. Hamson (2023) distinguishes them based on the news source:

a. Type Description

a. Expert Opinion A view from an individual possessing competence/expertise in a particular field;
b. Experiential Opinion A view from an individual with direct experience related to the topic;

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c. Mandatory Opinion A view mandated by one's position/office (e.g., public officials).

b. General characteristics of opinion fact:

a. Sourced from an individual's understanding of facts, expressed in a statement;
b. Its truth depends on the truth of the facts and the truth of the understanding;
c. Relative in nature, depends on facts, understanding, and manner of expression;
d. Usually preceded by words such as: "in my opinion," "it seems," "I feel";
e. Information not yet proven true; not a final conclusion;
f. If later verified, the opinion becomes a fact.

Logical Sequence of the Four Facts

Hamson emphasizes that the use of the four facts must have a logical sequence and relevance to the subject matter. A sequence of facts that is correct but lacks logical order and relevance becomes merely "a string of truths without accuracy, tending to mislead the reader" (Z Hamson, 2020b).

The ideal order in news construction:

a. Empirical Fact: foundation: what happened, when, where, how (direct verification);
b. Public Fact: social context: how society responds, what is widely known;
c. Psychological Fact: human dimension: emotional/mental impact on victims/witnesses;
d. Opinion Fact: interpretation: views from experts, experience, or mandatory sources to enrich perspective.

Functions of Facts in News

Based on Hamson (Z Hamson, 2019b), (Z Hamson, 2022), the functions of facts in news include:

a. strengthening supporting data
b. providing valid information
c. delivering news comprehensively and completely
d. adding utility value to news
e. convincing that the news is impartial

2. RESEARCH METHOD

1. Approach

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with content analysis techniques applied to the works of Zulkarnain Hamson (Z Hamson, 2019a), (Z Hamson, 2020a), (Z Hamson, 2022), (Z Hamson, 2023a) and news reports on Joko Widodo's diploma case from various media outlets.

2 Data Sources

A. Primary data:

a. Text from the book Forensic Journalism: Dissecting News Facts (CV AA Rizky, 2023);
b. Conference paper "Understanding the Four News Facts" (JOIN, 2019);
c. News reports on Joko Widodo's diploma case from national media (Kompas, Tempo, Detik, BBC Indonesia, Tribunnews).

B. Secondary data:

a. Official statements from Polri's Bareskrim, UGM, and Indonesia's General Elections Commission (KPU);
b. Court indictments and rulings (East Jakarta District Court, 2026);
c. Journalism and communication literature.

3. Analysis Techniques

Analysis is conducted thematically in three stages:

a. Definition identification: outlining the characteristics of each fact;
b. Manifestation mapping: identifying how each fact is manifested in the case reporting;
c. Logical sequence analysis: evaluating the relationships among the four facts and their impact on news accuracy.

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3. RESULT AND DISCCUSSION

1. Case Overview: Chronology of the Joko Widodo Diploma Controversy

The Joko Widodo diploma controversy is one of the most complex information disputes in contemporary Indonesian political history. Key chronology:

Period	Event
October 2022	Eggi Sudjana first alleged that Joko Widodo's diploma was fake
March 2025	TPUA filed a report on alleged diploma forgery with Polri's Bareskrim
May 20, 2025	Joko Widodo examined at Bareskrim (22 questions, 1 hour)
May 22, 2025	Bareskrim declared the diploma genuine based on Puslabfor testing; investigation terminated
July 9, 2025	Special case review; same result—diploma genuine
July 31, 2025	Bareskrim affirmed that termination of investigation was correct (SP3D)
November 7, 2025	Eggi Sudjana and Damai Hari Lubis designated as suspects (Cluster I)
July 2, 2026	Tifauzia Tyassuma (Dokter Tifa) indicted for defamation and slander
July 23, 2026	Dokter Tifa's objection granted; first indictment voided
August 6, 2026	Dokter Tifa announced withdrawal from the controversy, refocusing as a researcher
September 17, 2026	First trial of Roy Suryo at East Jakarta District Court (indictment); second indictment trial of Dokter Tifa
September 24, 2026	Continued trial of Roy Suryo (scheduled)

2. Empirical Fact in the Joko Widodo Diploma Case

The empirical fact in this case consists of findings that can be directly and measurably verified. Key confirmed findings:

A. Forensic Verification:

a. On May 22, 2025, Bareskrim declared Joko Widodo's S1 (Bachelor's) diploma from the Faculty of Forestry at Gadjah Mada University (UGM) genuine, based on testing by Polri's Forensic Laboratory (Puslabfor) that compared the document with three diplomas from alumni of the same cohort (paper material, printing technique, ink, stamp, and signature) (Kompas, 2025);
b. Investigators found supporting documents: study results card (KHS) NIM 1681/KT, tuition payment receipt for Semester 2 of AY 1981–1982, a permission request letter, and the oral examination proceedings document signed by the examiners (Ir. Sumitro, Ir. Sofyan, Ir. P. Burhanuddin);
c. Joko Widodo's name appeared in the academic newspaper of UGM's Faculty of Forestry, verified by library staff;

B. Institutional Verification:

a. Examination of 39 witnesses and direct verification at SMAN 6 Surakarta, UGM, and the KPU of Jakarta;
b. Indonesia's KPU stated that the diploma had been verified as valid during the 2019 General Election candidacy process;
c. The investigation was terminated (SP3) as no criminal elements were found.

C. Empirical verification level: Very high. The evidence is a posteriori, measurable, and reproducible through forensic laboratory testing.

3. Public Fact in the Joko Widodo Diploma Case

The public fact records the collective response of society and institutions to the event:

A. Complainant Side:

a. The issue heated up after the 2024 election, driven by groups such as Tim Pembela Ulama dan Aktivis (TPUA), Eggi Sudjana, Roy Suryo, Rismon Sianipar, and Tifauzia Tyassuma (Dokter Tifa);

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b. The "fake diploma" narrative continued to circulate on social media despite being refuted by authoritative institutions.

B. Institutional Side:

a. UGM issued official clarifications multiple times (October 2022, March 2025, August 2025, September 2026), affirming that Joko Widodo enrolled in 1980, graduated on November 5, 1985, and received his diploma at the convocation ceremony;
b. Peradi Bersatu (United Law Association) reported Roy Suryo, Rismon Sianipar, and Tifauzia Tyassuma to Bareskrim (April 24, 2025).

C. Public Side:

a. Public polarization: some accepted official clarifications, while others remained skeptical;
b. Volunteers met Joko Widodo in Solo, urging police to promptly determine the legal status of Roy Suryo (October 2025).

D. Public verification level: Representative, yet persistent polarization exists—some of the public accepts official clarifications, while others remain skeptical. This demonstrates a gap between public fact (what many people know) and empirical fact (what is verified).

4. Psychological Fact in the Joko Widodo Diploma Case

The psychological dimension in this case is reflected in the direct expressions of those who experienced it:

A. Joko Widodo (respondent):

a. Stated that the diploma issue was "painful" and threatened to pursue legal action;
b. Appeared at Bareskrim on May 20, 2025, answering 22 questions over one hour, and submitted his original diploma for testing;
c. Did not attend the special case review (July 9, 2025) as he had already granted legal representation to his legal team.

B. Complainants:

a. Roy Suryo and Tifauzia Tyassuma experienced psychological pressure after being designated as suspects in the defamation/incitement case, they felt they were "asking a legitimate question" and now face legal proceedings;
b. Roy Suryo rejected the Restorative Justice mechanism and stated he was "ready to fight" (September 17, 2026);
c. Tifauzia Tyassuma announced her withdrawal from the controversy after approximately 450 days of involvement, choosing to refocus as a researcher (August 6, 2026).

C. UGM Alumni (direct witnesses):

Alumni from the same cohort openly refuted the allegations, stating they knew him well and had studied together, and offered to compare diplomas directly.

D. Public:

Some felt "deceived" for years, while others felt "the truth has finally been silenced"both are traumatic expressions valid only from those who directly experienced them.

E. Psychological verification level:

Fulfilled from both sides (complainants and respondent), but journalists must ensure the source indeed directly experienced the event, not merely observed it.

5. Opinion Fact in the Joko Widodo Diploma Case

Type of Opinion Source Content

a. Expert Opinion Refly Harun (S2 Law Alumni, UI, Roy Suryo's legal team) Application of the defamation article was premature as no official forum had declared the diploma fake;
b. Expert Opinion Firmanto Laksana (Professor, Unissula, S2 Law Alumni UGM) The trial serves as a forum for Joko Widodo to demonstrate the validity of his diploma
c. Mandatory Opinion Rector of UGM, Ova Emilia "We have data and evidence that Mr. Joko Widodo is officially a UGM graduate" (September 2026);

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d. Mandatory Opinion Head of Criminal Investigation, Bareskrim, Djuhandhani Rahardjo Puro "The diploma is genuine based on scientific research by Puslabfor and examination of 39 witnesses" (May 2025);
e. Experiential Opinion UGM same-cohort alumni "My diploma can be compared with Mr. Joko Widodo's. They are all the same except for the graduation number.";
f. Experiential Opinion Tifauzia Tyassuma (Dokter Tifa) "Mr. Joko Widodo, whom I respect, if you truly have the diploma, show it" she admitted she had never seen the physical diploma, only examined digital documents (September 2026).

Critical note: In this case, mandatory opinions from authoritative institutions (Bareskrim, UGM, KPU) carry the highest verification weight because they are supported by empirical data. Legal expert opinions (Refly Harun) serve as a counter-perspective that enriches reporting without displacing empirical facts.

6. Analysis: Logical Sequence and Implications

The Joko Widodo diploma case demonstrates the urgency of the four-fact framework in journalistic practice:

a. Without empirical fact, news becomes a string of unverified claims—exactly like the "fake diploma" narrative that circulated on social media without forensic evidence. In this case, the empirical fact (Puslabfor testing) serves as the anchor determining the direction of truth;
b. Without public fact, news loses social context, it is not visible how the issue was politicized post-election or how collective public response was divided. The public fact in this case shows that public perception does not automatically follow forensic verification;
c. Without psychological fact, news loses its human dimension, the emotional impact on Joko Widodo, the complainants, and the alumni who served as witnesses goes unheard. The expression "painful" from Joko Widodo and "ready to fight" from Roy Suryo provide narrative depth that data cannot replace;
d. Without opinion fact, news becomes flat there is no legal expert perspective contextualizing the juridical implications (Article 263 of the Criminal Code, ITE Law, citizen lawsuit, KPU verification).

Main finding: This case proves that verified empirical facts (Puslabfor testing) do not automatically erase public facts (public perception). Journalists who rely on only one fact, whether empirical or opinion, will produce biased reporting. The completeness of the four facts, arranged with logical coherence, produces news that is:

a. Accurate (forensic verification);
b. Contextual (public polarization);
c. Humanistic (psychological impact);
d. Critical (balanced expert perspectives).

7. Implications in the Era of Disinformation

In the digital media era with rapid information dissemination, journalists' critical capacity is the primary asset (Z Hamson, 2023a), (Z Hamson, 2023b). Without critical capacity, journalists lose the essence of their profession and are unable to dissect facts in depth. The four facts function as a layered verification mechanism:

Fact Verification Function

a. Empirical Ensures the event genuinely occurred (forensic evidence, documents, witnesses);
b. Public Ensures representativeness (collective response, institutional clarification);
c. Psychological Ensures the human dimension (emotional impact on directly affected parties);
d. Opinion Ensures diversity of verified perspectives (expert, experiential, mandatory).

The Joko Widodo diploma case shows that this mechanism works dynamically: when empirical facts have been verified (diploma is genuine), opinion facts from opposing parties (Dokter Tifa, Roy Suryo) must still be covered proportionately as part of the right of reply and freedom of expression

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however, they must be contextualized to indicate that such opinions do not alter verified empirical facts.

8. Distinction Between Opinion Fact and Journalist's Opinion

This distinction is crucial. Opinion fact is sourced from a specific individual designated as a source by the journalist (expert, actor, or official). A journalist's opinion is the reporter's own interpretation, which in professional journalistic practice must be separated from factual reporting. Hamson (2023) emphasizes that a clear distinction between news and opinion is essential for gaining public trust.

In this case, a journalist who writes "Joko Widodo's diploma is fake" without forensic verification has conflated the journalist's opinion with factual reporting—an ethical violation that risks misleading the public. Conversely, a journalist who writes "Bareskrim declared Joko Widodo's diploma genuine based on Puslabfor testing" has properly separated empirical fact from interpretation.

4. CONCLUSION

1. Conclusions

a. The news construction framework based on the four facts of Zulkarnain Hamson provides a layered verification framework proven relevant to contemporary journalistic practice, particularly in cases involving public polarization;
b. The Joko Widodo diploma case (2024–2026) demonstrates that the completeness of the four facts empirical, public, psychological, and opinion arranged with coherent logical coherence, produces news that is accurate, informative, enlightening, and functions as a social control mechanism;
c. Verified empirical facts do not automatically erase public facts (public perception). Journalists must be able to present both proportionately: acknowledging forensic verification results while recording the persistence of public perception that has not been erased;
d. Amid the proliferation of disinformation and alternative facts, the four-fact framework serves as a practical guide for journalists to maintain accuracy and public trust.

2. Recommendations

a. For journalists: Apply the four-fact framework systematically in every report, particularly in cases involving polarization. Ensure each fact has a valid and verifiable source;
b. For journalism education institutions: Integrate the Forensic Journalism framework into journalism education curricula as a layered verification method;
c. For future researchers: Conduct comparative studies on similar cases (e.g., controversies over other officials' diplomas) to test the generalizability of the four-fact framework. Research using quantitative approaches (content analysis on a large sample of news articles) can complement this study.

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