

Female *Dangdut* Singers as Folk Devils in Indonesian Online Media

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Abstract:

This paper aims to discuss the ways Indonesian online media presents some groups of women as ‘folk devils’, persons who are labeled as deviant to the social norms and convention. The Indonesian media has a great role in identifying and creating women as ‘folk devils’, such as female *dangdut* singers, mother killers, girl gangs, women in relationships with younger men and women in relationships with married men. The conventional assumption that media is objective and apolitical in its journalism is challenged as in fact the media is bias and political in the ways it selects news that are reported to its readers. The criteria used to select news are in line with the operating ideologies that are designed to hegemonize, using the trivial and common sense to create truth. Using Stanley Cohen’s concept on ‘folk devils’, this paper will analyze news reports on female *dangdut* singers to identify the media bias and the working of social control on female *dangdut* singers. From the phenomenon of Inul Daratista with her ‘drilling movement’ until the recent news on the involvement of female *dangdut* singers in most corruption cases, *dangdut* singers are always in the center of the Indonesian news. In 2003, the controversies surrounding Inul was such that every little detail of her life and activities were reported by almost all TV stations and tabloids, not to mention books and research specifically published to discuss the *Inulmania*. Media might position female *dangdut* singers in the marginalized group, but at the same time they are also acknowledged the female *dangdut* singers as powerful. These seemingly inconsistent ways of looking at the position of female *dangdut* singers in the Indonesian society might reveal the operating ideology of the Indonesian media and the existing structure of the Indonesian society.

Keywords: female *dangdut* singers, Indonesian online media, ‘folk devils’, marginalized group, hegemony

This paper is one of the several papers written from a research project on “the representation of women as ‘folk devils’ in Indonesian online media”, under the research grant of Indonesian Directorate General of Higher Education. From this research, we are able to identify five groups of women who are recurrently portrayed negatively by the media: female *dangdut* singers, mother killers, girl gangs, women in relationship with younger men and women in relationship with married men. This identification is by no means exhaustive and there might be some other groups of women labeled as ‘folk devils’ that are created at different time and historical context. The data that are used are online news from 2003 to 2013. Online reports on female *dangdut* singers takes over the news on the other four groups of women. Considering how female *dangdut* singers have sparked controversies during the New Order as well as in the Reformation era, it is no wonder that their affairs are deemed news worthy.

The so called *Inulmania* that swept over the country in 2003 was a phenomenon that cannot escape our attention. In the academic field, researches, scholarly articles, papers

presented in conferences and even books were written about it. To mention a few examples are Ariel Heryanto's book chapter entitled "Popular Culture and Competing Identities" that discusses *Inulmania* as more than just a case of female *dangdut* singer being banned from performing, but it tells much about the political and communication transformation that happened during those years. In his research on *dangdut* as genre in music, Andrew N. Weintraub dedicates some of his journal articles and a chapter of his book on *Inulmania*. A couple of books published locally are *Inul!* and *Mengebor Kemunafikan* voicing the pros and cons on the singer. *Basis*, a scholarly magazine, published one of its issues on Inul, relating Inul and her famous posterior to other aspects of the country's life. Emha Ainun Najib's most quoted article in *Kompas*, "*Pantat Inul Adalah Wajah Kita Semua*" (Inul's Rear End is Our Collective Face), discusses the already corrupt morality of the nation. Not to mention other local and international news reports and blogs that are printed or published online, the attention given to this particular *dangdut* singer and her posterior was beyond belief. More than a decade after *Inulmania*, is it still relevant to discuss *dangdut* singers? *Inulmania* might have calmed down, but controversies surrounding female *dangdut* singers are far from resolved.

Dangdut, female dangdut singers and the media

Dangdut is acknowledged to be the music of the people and Weintraub (2006) describes "Indonesia's most popular music is arguably its most hybrid, blending Melayu, Arabic, and Indian musical elements with American, Latin, and European popular forms" (414) and it is *dangdut*. He relates that historically the genre is associated with the marginalized

Dangdut is thought to reflect the desires and aspirations of 'the people', primarily those who occupy the lower stratum of the political and economic structure: 'little people' (*rakyat kecil*); 'common people' (*rakyat jelata*); 'poverty-stricken' (*rakyat je'mbe'l*); 'underclass group' (*golongan bawah*); 'marginalized group' (*kaum marginal*); those who have been pushed aside (*pinggiran*); and 'the middle class and below' (*kelas menengah ke bawah*) (412).

Although in the 1970s *dangdut* was associated with the marginalized lower class, its popularity grew and it was embraced by the middle class through the commercial television programs in the 1990s. In the 21st century, it became "a large consumer industry" (412-413) As the music of the people, it is an accepted practice that the female *dangdut* singers wear costumes deemed appropriate for them to freely sway their hips (*goyang*) in accordance to the music. Wintraub (2012) describes that *goyang*, literary means 'to move' but in *dangdut*, it involves the swaying of the waist, the hips and the buttocks as a natural and unconscious movement in response to the *dangdut* music (23). It is this *goyang dangdut* that sparks controversies and at the same time it becomes a commodity to be bought and sold.

The unpopularity of *dangdut* and *dangdut* singers since the New Order are in a whirlwind of ups and downs. In the New Order, *dangdut* singers experienced being banned from performing and also a heyday when they were recruited by political parties for political campaigns. In the Reformation era, the phenomenon of Inul Daratista with her 'drilling movement' to the female *dangdut* singers' involvement in the country's major corruption cases, make female *dangdut* singers in the center of the Indonesian news. In 2003, the controversies surrounding Inul was such that every little detail of her life and activities were reported by almost all TV stations and tabloids, not to mention books and scholarly papers

dedicated to analyze the Inul phenomenon. In 2005, the controversial Dewi Persik replaced Inul's domination of the news headlines. In 2006, a *dangdut* singer, Maria Eva shook the political world because of her affair with a member of DPR (House of Representatives) that resulted in his resignation. In 2008, compared to other *dangdut* singers who usually came from marginalized class, a *dangdut* singer with a middle class background and international experience as a model, Julia Perez, made her debut. In 2011, Ayu Ting Ting, a new generation of teenaged *dangdut* singer rose to fame with her song *Alamat Palsu* (Faked address). In 2013, Zaskia Gotik, another idol of teenaged *dangdut* singer was reported to be conned by her one-day fiancé, Vicky Prasetyo, that we now have 'vickinisasi' in our Indonesian vocabulary to describe the bizarre use of the mixture of Indonesian and English to give an intellectual image. In the last couple of years, *dangdut* singers again become headlines of most news reports in their involvement with major corruption cases of Ahmad Fathanah and Akil Mochtar. And in the 2014, we witnessed several *dangdut* singers recruited by political parties as candidates in the legislature election. Those are just few examples of how *dangdut* singers are able to steal the headlines of news reports, not to mention their marriages, divorces and affairs with some prominent Indonesian political and business figures. Aside from them, there are dozens of singers who are extremely popular among the people and in high demand in live *dangdut* performances in weddings, circumcisions, birthdays and festivals in villages and *kampung*. Considering the long history of the roles of female *dangdut* singers in the Indonesian society, it is no wonder that female *dangdut* singers accept a lot of attention from the media. The roles of the media in the making of the *dangdut* singers is indeed prominent.

Folk Devils and the media

'Folk devils' is a term coined by Stanley Cohen in his seminal book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2002), to describe individuals or groups seen as deviant and of which society disapproves. Donson et al (2004) describes that the label of folk devils is usually applied to people who are already marginalized.

The typical folk devil is therefore someone on the edge of or even outside of society These people do not have a voice; they are already effectively silent within civil society and are therefore an easy target for demonization (6-7) 'Normal' folk devils are marginalized by their pre-existing marginal position in society and are therefore an easy and often convenient target (26).

Both Cohen and Donson et al suggest that the label 'folk devils' is an image that is processed and constructed. The media is accused as the institution that is responsible for the labeling. Becker (quoted in Cohen 2002) explains the connection of deviance to labeling that "deviance is *not* a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an 'offender'. The deviant is one to whom the label has successfully been applied" (4). Becker makes it very clear that deviance is a label given to individuals or groups that break the rules made by other social groups. The individuals or groups, who are accused of deviant actions, commonly belong to the marginalized and the subordinate who do not share the values or ideologies of the dominant groups. As a consequence, they are deemed as deviant, the folk devils of that society. It is not the actions of the person that make her/him labeled as a folk devil, but more of the punishment given to the person for her/his deviance against the shared norms and values of

the dominant groups. Thus, it is more because of the exercise of the mechanism of social control to protect the dominant ideologies that leads to deviance.

Cohen (2002) accuses the media as the one that creates the so called moral panics after it identifies a certain folk devil. It blows up a story out of proportion and creates a sense of crisis as if the moral values of the whole nation crumble because of this one deviant action of a folk devil. The media draws on the opinions of the society to be the 'moral guardians' of the nation moral values, such as the representatives of religious, social and political institutions to condemn the deviant behavior of the folk devils. In this instance, the media has appointed itself to be the moral guardian of the nation by indignantly condemned the folk devil and suggesting that this one act of deviance may lead to the disintegrations of the moral life of the whole nation. When the readers also shares this sentiment, using Althusser's concept of 'interpellation' (quoted in Storey, 2001, p. 102), the readers become the subject of the media's discourse. As media acts as the subject of the dominant ideology, the readers will also become its subject. What is kept hidden from the audience is the ideology on which the media operates when it 'processed' a story. Media always embraces a particular ideology that underlines the selection of events deemed to be newsworthy. The bias is based on a structure that has become a system, a foundation, on which the news people and organizations work to select what is considered as news and not news from the overflowing information that they have. It means that the stories that are reported have been reconstructed based on the ideology the media operates, so that readers always receive fragmented stories; using a certain version of a story that gives no space for the story owner to tell her/his own story. Ignorant readers would receive the fragmented stories as the 'truth', never suspecting that there might be some other 'hidden truth' kept from them. The media is actively constructing meanings, rather than merely 'reflecting' some supposedly shared reality. The process of selections becomes more complex when the already selected stories presented to the audience are further decoded by the audience using a similar process of selection. When the readers also share the same ideology, the effectiveness of the media's reporting of the supposedly 'folk devils' is complete as it draws from the readers' support.

Understanding the nature on how a piece of story or news is going through such a complex process of selections either by the news people/news organizations or/and the readers, leads us to the awareness that we would never get or comprehend the whole picture or the diverse aspects of a story. A piece of news, as we understand it, has gone through several stages of selections that are founded on certain sets of values that our perception of a piece of news is always fragmented. When fragments are repeatedly broadcasted, those fragments become trivialized and become common sense. Gramsci called this kind of common sense as cultural hegemony where "there is a high degree of consensus, a large measure of social stability; a society in which subordinate groups and classes appear to actively support and subscribe to values, ideals, objectives cultural and political meanings, which bind them to, and 'incorporate' them into, the prevailing structures of power" (Storey, 2001, p. 103-4). The hegemony does not happen by force, but by consent, as "[h]egemony denotes the moment when the ruling class is able not merely to coerce its subordinates to conform, but to exercise the sort of power which wins and shapes consent, which frames alternatives and structures agendas in such a way as to appear natural" (Cohen, 2002, p. lxvi). The belief of the media as objective and apolitical becomes an empty discourse believed by the ignorant few. Cohen (2002) emphasizes that "[t]he importance of the media lies . . . in the way they reproduce and sustain the dominant ideology" (p. xxix). The influence of the media in constructing gender roles also works in the same principle. Reports on gender roles by the Indonesian online news are bias and fragmented, especially in its reports on female *dangdut* singers who do not conform to the social expectations and beliefs on women's roles.

Female *dangdut* singers as folk devils

Despite the fact that they are singers, news reports on the female *dangdut* singers are focused on their bodies instead on the quality of their voices. In these news reports, opinions on these female *dangdut* singers are drawn from the common people, experts, politician, government officials, religious groups and Indonesian Ulamas Council (MUI). Opinions are divided between those who protest on the impropriety of the dancing style which involves the swaying of the pelvis and the bump-grind routine in tune with the *dangdut* music to be too erotic and considered to mimic the sexual activities; and those who see the dancing as a form of the freedom for artistic expression. Thus the bodies of *dangdut* singers are transformed as a site where opposite opinions struggle to dominate. Interestingly, news reports written in Indonesian by the local media and in English by international media also have different tunes. Most of the local media reports unfavorably and taking a stance to condemn the erotic dancing as destroying the morality of the nation, whereas the international media is more neutral and tend to regard the dancing as a form of art rooted in folk dancing (Yamin 2003; Seneviratne 2006).

Below are some descriptions on how media reports the way the *dangdut* singers dress themselves:

tampil sensual (Liputan6.com, 2003); *vulgar, terlalu panas, kemben melorot* (Liputan 6.com 2008); *sang penyanyi sengaja membuka bagian paha* (Kabar6.com 2011); *berpenampilan seronok, pakaian minim, penampilan 'berani' cenderung porno* (Kompasiana 2011); *haram hukumnya jika bernyanyi dengan mengumbar aurat, berpakaian yang tembus pandang, berpakaian yang tipis sehingga memperlihatkan bagian tubuh di dalam* (Kapanlagi.com 2011).

The words that are used to describe the way they dress are: showing their thighs on purpose, dress in a vulgar way barely covering themselves, daringly showing themselves with a pornographic tendency, vulgar, too hot, sheer costume that reveal parts of the body, etc. Most of the reports describe that the way they dress combined with the way they do the *goyang dangdut* (*dangdut* dance) would arouse the erotic feeling of the male audience. Thus these combination are considered to be so potent that the *dangdut* singers are accused of destroying the nation morality as the purposely seduce the male members of the nation.

tarian dan goyongannya dianggap seronok dan merusak moral masyarakat, dapat mengundang kejahatan moral (Kapanlagi.com 2005); *berpotensi merusak moral, bertentangan dengan agama* (Detik.com 2008); *menimbulkan kerawanan sosial, dapat menimbulkan birahi terutama bagi anak-anak dan remaja, dinilai berbahaya, berpenampilan seksi dicemaskan bisa mengundang birahi kaum Adam* (Surabaya Post.co.id 2011); *merusak moral generasi muda* (Okezone 2011); *meresahkan masyarakat dan dapat berpotensi merusak moral generasi muda* (Kompasiana 2011); *bergoyang erotis seolah ingin mengundang syahwat* (Kabar 6.com 2011).

In English, these phrases refer to how the singers and the dancing would destroy the people's morality as it is against the religion and would impact to moral and social criminality of the young generation and men because of the sexual arousal they cause. The words that are repeated in almost all reports are *merusak moral* (destroy the morality), but what is mentioned is only the morality of the young as well as the adult male. What is interesting is that how the nation and the young generation consist only of the male members. There is a

general assumption that when the morality of the male members is corrupted, then it is the destruction of the whole nation. Women are excluded and put in a position where they do not matter. In this discourse, the women is limited to the the *dangdut* singers who are put in a position of the 'other', as the seductress who would endanger the life of the nation. Their performance is such that the male member of the nation cannot resist the temptation of the *dangdut* singers as seductress. Webster on-line dictionary defines the word 'seducer' as a bad person who entices others into error or wrong-doing and this word commonly refers to a man who take advantage of women. But in contemporary uses, this word has changed its connotation as a seducer is commonly referred to a woman rather than man. For female seducer, the word 'seductress' is used and it is synonymous with 'enchantress', 'femme fatale', 'siren' and 'temptress'; all of which mean a fascinating or beautiful woman who lures men into dangerous or compromising situations that might lead men into destruction. In this case, the definition constructed by the media on female *dangdut* singers as seductress is most appropriate.

This position of the 'other' is further confirmed in how the female *dangdut* singers defy the local Indonesian cultures and the teachings of the religion.

tarian erotisnya, Inul telah menyepelkan masyarakat kita yang masih menjunjung tinggi moral susila dan ajaran agamanya (SuaraMerdeka 2003); atraksi "Goyang ngebor" Inul itu akan ikut mengancam eksistensi budaya lokal tidak mendidik bangsa, mengajarkan hal-hal yang negatif (Gatra.com 2003); tidak sesuai dengan budaya masyarakat setempat (Surabayapost.co.id 2011) goyangan yang heboh di atas panggung, mengumbar birahi, terkesan mengabaikan adat dan budaya masyarakat kita (Suaramerdeka.com 2011) .

Not only are they the seductress, but the *dangdut* singers are also accused as the deviant to the local norms and values. They are accused of disregarding the Indonesian people who still hold their moral and religious values in high esteem, threatening the existence of the local cultures and tradition, and not educating the people by the negative examples of their wantonness. Relating this to Cohen's definition, folk devils is a label given by the media referring to individuals or groups who are accused of deviant actions, commonly belong to the marginalized and the subordinate who do not share the values or ideologies of the dominant groups. As women, the female *dangdut* singers is already a marginalized group in the way women are not considered as the member of the nation and their behaviors are judged to defy the norms and values of the dominant group. These female *dangdut* singers are constructed as the folk devils of the society.

Cohen (2002) further states that after a folk devil is identified by the media, a moral panic follows when media blows up a story out of proportion and creates a sense of crisis as if the moral values of the whole nation crumble because of this one deviant action of a folk devil. As described in the previous paragraph how the female *dangdut* singers are held responsible to the destruction of the moral and religious values of the nation, a moral panic also swept over the country, especially during the controversies surrounding Inul and the time when a Pronographic Bill was to be issued in 2011. The country prominent figures go hand in hand, professing themselves to be the upright members of the nation who are responsible in guarding the nation's youth, men, values, norms and cultures to condemn these singers. The prominent figures who elect themselves to be the country's guardians are of course the male members as described in the several news reports below.

sejumlah kelompok masyarakat yang gerah dengan tarian erotisnya, Media Watch & Consumer Center (MWCC), Masyarakat Tolak Pornografi (MTP) (SuaraMerdeka.com 2003); kalangan umat dan tokoh-tokoh umat Islam, kelompok-kelompok keagamaan, mereka yang mengaku penganut paham kesusilaan (Balipost.com 2003); ulama, pejabat daerah, dan artis Ibu Kota, Majelis Ulama Indonesia, sempat mengeluarkan Fatwa Haram terhadap Inul, "Raja Dangdut" Rhoma Irama yang mengaku mewakili insan musik di Tanah Air (Liputan6.com 2003); bupati cianjur, Ir H Wasidi Swastomo Msi, anggota DPRD setempat, , Ustadz Muhammad Toha S.Ag, yang juga Ketua Partai Bulan Bintang (PBB) Kabupaten Cianjur, anggota DPRD lainnya dari Fraksi Kebangkitan Bangsa, Ahmad Zeni Khoeruzoeni (Kapanlagi.com 2005); Rhoma Irama, DPR Komisi VIII (Detik.com 2006) Walikota Depok Nur Mahmudi Ismail (Detik.com 2008); MUI Palembang (Tribunnews.com 2011); MUI Sumsel (Surabayapost.co.id 2011); MUI Provinsi Jawa Barat, MUI Sumatera Selatan (Kompasiana 2011) kalangan pemuda (Sudirman), dan para tokoh agama di Tangerang dan kepolisian (Kabar 6.com 2011) Polisi tak izinkan, cabut ijin konser (Vivanews.com 2011).

This long list of individuals or groups who denounce the female *dangdut* singers as deviant, consist of government officials, religious leaders and groups, members of DPR (House of Representatives), MUI (Indonesian Council of Ulamas), leaders of political parties and the police. Government officials banned them from performing in their cities, the police refuse to give permits for live *dangdut* performances, MUI announces its *fatwa* (edict) *haram* (forbidden), 'king of *dangdut*' Rhoma Irama appoints himself to represent the Indonesian musician criticizes Inul's drilling movement, and religious leaders and group banned a list of female *dangdut* singers from performing. Wintraub (2008) describes the controversies surrounding Inul as creating quite a commotion when "[p]ublic statements by MUI clerics, Islamic groups, and Rhoma Irama ignited a huge debate in the popular print media among politicians, religious leaders, feminists, intellectuals, celebrities, fans and even doctors" (368). Those who denounce the female *dangdut* singers are people with positions in the society, thus they belong to the dominant groups who protect the norms and values that are not shared by the female *dangdut* singers, therefore the female *dangdut* singers are labeled as deviant. This group of male member of the country demands the female *dangdut* singers to stop their erotic performances and to repent. This demand can be read as how the dominant group tries to make the marginalized group to embrace the same ideology and later to hegemonize them. It can also be read as the exercise of the male power against the female powerlessness. Gramsci's cultural hegemony works well in the case of Inul as she moves from the periphery to the center after she reaped her success through commercial television and becomes a successful business woman and a mother. Used to be condemned as a folk devil, at present, Inul is a member of the dominant group that denounced her. She has been successfflly hegemonized by the dominant group. This reveals that the Indonesian society is still a patriarchal society despite its laws and regulations which claimed to be gender conscious. It gives no space to the other groups to voice themselves.

Indonesia as a patriarchal society protects its ideology by ensuring that the social structure is not disturbed or altered; therefore, it shields its male members' involvement in promoting the erotic *dangdut* performances. The absence from the news reports such as the event organizers; owners, directors and producers of commercial television stations; owners of recording companies; and other groups or individual who invite live *dangdut* performances by the female singers for weddings, political campaigns and other festivities, say much about the Indonesian social structure. Using the economic law of supply and demand, these female

dangdut singers just supply their services to the demand of those who have the means to do so. But these groups with means and dominantly male are never blamed or condemned in their roles in promoting such performances. In line with how the male audience is also protected from the seduction of the singers, the male actors that promote such performances are also shielded by making them absent from the news report. This shows how media reports on them is so fragmented that the female *dangdut* singers are constructed to be the sole party responsible for the performances. They are constructed to be the main and single actor causing the controversies and for that, they should carry the blames of the society on their own shoulders.

Conclusion:

Weintraub (2012) describes that historically, *dangdut* develops from the tradition of *saweran* (give money) that has a deep root as the music of the marginalized and it is always associated with eroticism. It is an accepted practice among the people that the female singers wear revealing costumes and dance suggestively to the *dangdut* tunes. When this practice is adopted by the middle class, it has to adjust itself to the norms and values of the class. It is on the bodies of these female *dangdut* singers that we can witness the struggles of ideologies and classes.

In portraying female *dangdut* singers as ‘folk devils’, the media has exercised its role as a social controller to protect the nation’s morality from being destroyed. The questions are: why is a social control needed? what is the fear about? or whom is (are) feared that a control is needed? As Erison notes (quoted in Cohen 2002, p. 8) that

a considerable portion of what we call as “news” is devoted to report about deviant behavior and its consequences’. . . . Such ‘news’ is a main source of information about the normative contours of a society. It informs us about right and wrong, about the boundaries beyond which one should not venture and about the shapes that the devil can assume. The gallery of folk types – heroes and saints, as well as fools, villain and devils – is publicized not just in oral-tradition and face-to-face contact, but to much larger audiences and with much greater dramatic resources.

Drawing from this explanation, we would be able to understand the normative outline of the Indonesian society, in how it regards female *dangdut* singers and the social control it holds to ensure the hegemony of the dominant class and gender ideology. The social control is working through the ‘moral panic’ that the media create to inform the others “about right and wrong, about the boundaries beyond which one should not venture by publicizing “[t]he gallery of folk types – heroes and saints, as well as fools, villain and devils” ” (Cohen 2002, p. 8). The larger audiences are warned not to defy the rules and regulations that have been set as the foundation of the Indonesian social structure. The negative reports on the deviance are the attempt for social control exercised by the media that has “long operated as agents of moral indignation in their own right” (ibid., p.7). This kind of social control illustrates how the trivial and the common sense are believed to be the truth. Ignorant audience would not be able to go beyond the given truth, thus they are ‘interpellated’ and the operating ideology is able to hegemonize.

Why are the female *dangdut* singers feared so much that they need to be controlled? The patriarchal ideology that seems to be unchallenged in its strong grip is but a façade for its vulnerable position. Men are considered to be naturally weak so that they need to be protected either by the state or private groups from the seduction of the female *dangdut*

singers. Therefore, these female *dangdut* singers need to be strongly controlled to ensure proper behaviors. The fact that at present a number of female *dangdut* singers move from the margin to the center means they are no longer the underprivileged group. Their involvement in the country's entertainment businesses, politics, and major scandals involving businessmen, politicians and government officials disclose that they are still playing the role of the deviance. This might mean that a possible transformation that is disturbing the existing structure of the Indonesian society is in process. Yet, the attempts for social control would always be exercised on groups of women labeled as folk devils to ensure that the patriarchal system and ideology that lie at the foundation of the Indonesian society goes unchallenged.

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