



The Perception of the People of Kuningan Regency Regarding the “Free Nutritious Meals Government Program” Through News in the Mass Media

Tiara Inayatul Maula¹, Farida Nurfalah^{2*}

Communication Sciences Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, University of Swadaya Gunung Jati

Corresponding Author: Farida Nurfalah farida.nurfalah@ugj.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

The Free Nutritional Meals Program is a public policy aimed at improving the nutrition and quality of human resources for schoolchildren. However, its success is also determined by how the public perceives the program through the mass media. The objectives of this study were: 1) to identify public perceptions of the Free Nutritional Meals Program, 2) to determine public responses to the implementation of the Free Nutritional Meals Program, and 3) to identify the role of the mass media in shaping public perceptions of the Free Nutritional Meals Program. This study used a descriptive qualitative approach, located in Kuningan Regency. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation with three informants selected using purposive sampling. Data were also supplemented with secondary data in the form of journals, books, and media reports. Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was tested through source triangulation. The results showed that the public generally understood the goals, objectives, and benefits of the Free Nutritional Meals Program through media coverage and provided a positive response, accompanied by a critical and realistic attitude towards its implementation in the field. Mass media plays a crucial role in shaping public perception through the presentation of clear information, the use of visuals, and concrete examples of implementation, thus helping the public interpret programs as relevant policy innovations. This research emphasizes the crucial role of mass communication in shaping public perception of government policies.

INTRODUCTION

The Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) is one of the Indonesian government's important policies aimed at addressing nutrition, improving the quality of human resources, and maintaining national resilience, especially for school children and pregnant women. This program was created due to high rates of hunger and stunting in Indonesia, which have a negative impact on students' learning abilities and academic performance. The government has allocated substantial funds for this program, but its implementation has received mixed reviews, both positive and negative, particularly regarding its effectiveness, sustainability, and impact on the community's economy.

In 2024, Indonesia still faces serious challenges in reducing stunting rates. According to the 2023 Indonesian Health Survey (SKI), the national prevalence of stunting stands at 21.5%, down only about 0.8% from the previous year (Nurmansyah et al., 2024). This figure is still far from the national target of 14% set in the 2020-2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN). To address this issue, the government launched the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) in early 2025. However, public perception of this program varies. A survey conducted by GoodStats shows that only 21% of the public agree with this program, while 20% choose not to give an opinion or are unaware of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program. This reflects a lack of information reaching the public about the objectives and implementation of the program (Rahmah et al., 2025).

One of the government's current focuses is the prevention of stunting. This effort aims to ensure that children and communities in Indonesia can grow and develop optimally and to their full potential, with the emotional, social, and physical abilities necessary to learn, innovate, and compete at the global level (Bachruddin et al., 2022).

Through the mass media, the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program has been widely discussed as a strategic step by the government to improve the quality of human resources, strengthen the national food system, and address the issue of malnutrition. However, along with this positive coverage, there have been mixed responses from the public. The mass media plays an important role as a channel of communication in shaping public perception of the program. According to Jalaluddin Rakhmat's theory of perception, perception is the process by which individuals receive, select, organize, and interpret the information they receive. Because each individual has different experiences, they form diverse perceptions of society (Irwanto, 2002).

Although this program has positive objectives in improving public health, there have been various responses from the community, with differing opinions regarding the news circulating in the media. Some view Free Nutritious Meals as an appropriate measure to meet nutritional needs, but others still have doubts about the quality of the food, the effectiveness of its implementation, and the government's readiness to manage this nationwide program (Pranandana et al., 2025).

Previous studies have focused more on the policy aspects, implementation evaluation, and nutritional impact of the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program. However, studies that specifically discuss public perceptions formed through mass media coverage are still very limited. Therefore, research is needed that highlights how the media plays a role in shaping and influencing public understanding of the program (Febryanti et al., 2025).

This research is important because it can contribute both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the research enriches the literature in the field of mass media, particularly regarding the influence of news coverage on the formation of public perceptions of government policies. Practically, the findings of this research are expected to provide input for the government and media institutions in improving their communication strategies so that information about Free Nutritious Meals is received positively and supports the smooth implementation of the program in the field.

This study aims to determine public perception of the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program through news reports in the mass media. The Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program is one of the government's policies aimed at improving the nutritional status of the community, especially school children. However, the success of a government program depends not only on its implementation in the field, but also on how the community receives and interprets it. The public forms perceptions based on the sources of information they use, and the mass media is the main channel of information that disseminates news about this program.

Every media report can present different perspectives, both in the form of supportive information and criticism of its implementation. Therefore, it is important to examine how the public perceives the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program based on information from the mass media, so that the results of the study can provide input for the government and the media in improving the mass media so that this program is more accepted, understood, and supported by the wider community.

Thus, this study was conducted due to the need to understand public perception and how that perception can contribute to the sustainability of the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Perception's Concept

Public perception is a cognitive process whereby individuals receive, interpret, and assign meaning to the information they receive. Perceptions are influenced by an individual's experiences, knowledge, and social environment. The quality of public support for the Free Nutritious Meals Program can be measured through dimensions such as the level of public acceptance, trust in the implementation of the program, emotional support or positive attitudes, and the existence of conflicts or criticism of the program.

This study combines the theoretical framework of Perception (Rakhmat, 2007) and the Diffusion of Innovations theory (Everett M. Roger) to identify gaps

in the literature and demonstrate the potential contribution of new research. Both theories conduct an in-depth analysis of how the public perceives the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program through news reports in the mass media.

Theory of Perception (Rakhmat, 2007)

Jalaluddin Rakhmat's Theory of Perception (2007) emphasizes that a person's perception of a message is greatly influenced by internal factors (knowledge, experience, motivation) and external factors such as the media and social environment. Perception is also the result of an individual's selection process of the messages they receive, so that the same message can be interpreted differently by each person (Fitriani, 2019). People do not receive information passively, but rather select and interpret it based on their own backgrounds. This shows that media messages can be understood differently by each individual depending on their personal and social contexts (Cole et al., 2019).

Theory of Innovation Diffusion (Everett M. Rogers)

The Diffusion of Innovations theory explains that mass media plays an important role in the early stages of innovation diffusion, especially in raising awareness and shaping initial perceptions of a program (Rogers et al., 2014). Everett M. Rogers also states that Innovation Diffusion is the process of conveying innovation through certain channels over time to members of a social system (Rogers et al., 2014). The mass media can influence public opinion regarding innovations, such as the relative benefits, complexity, and potential risks of the Free Nutritious Meals Program. These perceptions play a role in the persuasion stage and in the decision-making process to support or reject the program. Studies on the diffusion of innovations in the field of health services support the importance of media channels in accelerating adoption if the message is conveyed clearly, consistently, and relevantly (Muris & Dewi, 2025).

The Role of Mass Media in Shaping Perceptions

Mass media is a means or tool of communication used to convey information, messages, or news to the wider community simultaneously. Mass media plays a strategic role in shaping perceptions through the news it presents. In the case of news coverage of the Free Nutritious Meals program, the media can convey positive aspects such as efforts to improve nutrition and prevent stunting, but also highlight criticism related to large budgets, distribution challenges, and food quality. These differences in framing allow for diverse public perceptions of the Free Nutritious Meals Program. This shows that the mass media plays an important role in shaping public perceptions of social issues in mass media reporting (Yusuf, 2024).

Previous studies have shown that the mass media has a significant influence on shaping public support for government programs. Wasisto's study found that online media coverage of public policy can influence the level of public trust and participation in its implementation (Wasisto & Pahlevi, 2024).

In addition, studies on policy communication in Indonesian society emphasize the importance of consistent and easily understandable reporting to the public in order to avoid misinformation (Rofiah et al., 2021). If the media conveys unclear or biased information, the public may develop misconceptions, which could lead to low support for the program.

In addition, the emergence of various mass media has enabled the delivery or dissemination of communication messages to a wide audience (Nurfalah & Wihayati, 2016). Media coverage is crucial in shaping public perception of the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program, as the media acts as a filter and interpreter of information.

Therefore, understanding how the Free Nutritious Meals program is perceived by the public is important to ensure the effectiveness of government communication and the success of the program. This study is expected to contribute to the analysis of public communication and serve as a basis for more appropriate media strategies in conveying information about national health programs that have a broad impact on society.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method to gain an in-depth understanding of public perceptions of the government's Free Nutritious Meals Program. The study was conducted in Kuningan Regency, one of the target areas of the program. The data sources consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation of people who knew about or received information about the program through the mass media. Informants were determined using purposive sampling, with a total of three people who had relevant characteristics. The research instrument was the researcher himself with the help of interview guidelines. Secondary data was obtained from books, journals, and mass media news related to the program to strengthen the analysis and theoretical context.

Data validity was tested using source triangulation, which involved comparing interview results between informants on the same questions. Similarities in information indicated data consistency, while differences in opinion were recorded as a form of diversity in public perception.

Data analysis was conducted using the Miles and Huberman model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the data reduction stage, the information obtained was selected according to the research focus with reference to Jalaluddin Rakhmat's Perception Theory (2007). The reduced data was then presented in the form of a narrative description. Furthermore, conclusions were drawn based on the results of the analysis of public perception of the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program in the mass media, while ensuring the validity of the data through triangulation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on in-depth interviews with three informants, namely members of the general public (Mrs. Novi and Mr. H. Aan Syamsul Anwar) and a school teacher (Mrs. Indri), it appears that perceptions of the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG) as reported in the mass media are positive. These perceptions are formed through a process of selection, organization, and interpretation of information as described in Jalaluddin Rakhmat's Perception

Theory, and through the stages of Innovation Diffusion according to Everett M. Rogers.

Public Perception of the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program

Public perception of the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program is a reflection of the public's thoughts, beliefs, and assessments of the program, including its benefits, objectives, and impact on social, health, and economic life (Vinaya & Wulandari, 2025). This study shows that public perception of information about Free Nutritious Meals is influenced by news delivered through frequently accessed media, such as television and social media. These media have become the primary means of delivering information because they have become the norm for the public in seeking and receiving information.

The choice of media and how news headlines are written play an important role in attracting public attention. News headlines such as those related to aid and education tend to be more appealing because they are considered important and useful. This is in line with the selection process in perception, whereby people tend to pay attention to information that is relevant to their needs.

The following is an excerpt from the interview with the first informant:

"I usually watch TV and scroll through news on my cell phone. If the headline is about aid or education, I immediately click on it because I'm curious." (Results of an interview with informant 1, Mrs. Novi, on November 27, 2025) (Novi, 2025).

The same thing was conveyed by informant two as follows:

"I was watching TV at home. When news about Free Nutritious Meals came on, I usually listened, because it was related to school." (Interview with informant 3, Teacher Indri, on December 2, 2025) (Indri, 2025)

Based on the results of interviews with both informants, it appears that public perception of information about the Free Nutritious Meals Program is shaped by media consumption patterns and varying public interests. The first informant showed a higher interest in news, especially when the headlines or information related to aid or education appeared on television. Meanwhile, the second informant listened to the news because the program was related to school, which was part of his professional role and responsibility as a teacher.



Figure 1. Implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program
Research's Documentation, 2026

Overall, people's perception of information is largely determined by their habits in accessing media such as television and the relevance of news content to their daily lives, for example, news about education, aid, and so on. Information that is perceived to be closely related to people's needs or experiences usually attracts more attention. This study is also in line with Jalaluddin Rakhmat's opinion that attention is the initial process of perception, whereby individuals will choose something that they consider important to themselves (Rakhmat, 2007).

Community Response to the Implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program

Responses from the community, such as family, friends, and neighbors, strengthen informants' trust in the Free Nutritious Meals Program. When those closest to them respond positively, informants become more confident and believe that the program is worthy of support. Opinions from the surrounding community are considered more trustworthy because they come from people who interact directly with informants on a daily basis and understand their circumstances.

The positive response from the social environment also made the informants feel that they were not alone in supporting the program. The shared views of family and friends reinforced their belief that the Free Nutritious Meals Program was indeed beneficial and worthwhile. With this kind of social support, the informants' attitudes toward the program improved, because their trust was based not only on information from the media, but also on the views of those closest to them.

The following are the results of the interview with the first informant:

"Yes. If they support me, I will be more confident to participate." (Interview with informant 1, Mrs. Novi, on November 27, 2025) (Novi, 2025)

Similarly, informant two said the following:

"Yes, if family or friends say it's good, I'll definitely believe it too." (Interview with informant 2, Mr. H. Aan, on November 28, 2025) (Aan, 2025).

The same applies to informant three, as follows:

"Yes, if the environment is positive, we also become enthusiastic about doing it" (Results of an interview with informant 3, Teacher Indri, on December 2, 2025) (Indri, 2025).

All three informants stated that the support of their families, friends, and the surrounding community made them more confident about the Free Nutritious Meals Program. When those closest to them gave positive assessments, the informants tended to believe and support the program. A supportive environment also fostered enthusiasm and confidence in implementing the program. This shows that social support plays an important role in strengthening the informants' confidence in the Free Nutritious Meals Program.

Overall, the response from the community confirms that the success and acceptance of the Free Nutritious Meals Program depend not only on its implementation but also on the social response from the surrounding

community. The stronger the response from the surrounding community, the greater the community's trust in the Free Nutritious Meals Program.

The Role of Mass Media in Shaping Public Perception

Information about the Free Nutritious Meals Program gives informants a more positive and optimistic view, especially if the program is actually implemented as reported. The mass media plays a role in building hope and positive attitudes toward government policies. By regularly explaining the implementation steps, the mass media helps the public understand how the program works and what they need to know before participating in the program. This role is in line with research showing that the mass media can play an active role in conveying health information to the public (Ouchene et al., 2024).

In addition, the mass media also provides information about who are the beneficiaries of the program, such as age groups or communities most in need. By presenting information in a clear and structured manner, media coverage makes it easier for informants to understand the social context and long-term benefits of this program for public health. Other studies also confirm that the mass media functions as an educational agent that conveys health messages and healthy behaviors to the public, thereby triggering positive changes in public understanding and behavior (Permatasari et al., 2023).

The following are the results of the interview with the first informant:

“Yes, the news made me feel more positive. When I watched the news, it seemed that this program really intended to help children eat healthier. I think this program is good, and I hope it can continue.” (Results of an interview with informant Mrs. Novi on November 27, 2025) (Novi, 2025).

Similarly, informant two said the following:

“Yes, it makes me optimistic if it is actually implemented.” (Results of an interview with informant Mr. H. Aan on November 28, 2025) (Aan, 2025).

Based on the results of interviews with both informants, it can be seen that media coverage has a positive influence on public perception of the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program. The information conveyed in the media has fostered a sense of optimism and hope that the program is truly aimed at improving children's nutrition and can be implemented on a sustainable basis.

Overall, the mass media has a positive influence on public perception. This positive perception shows that the mass media plays an important role in shaping public understanding of the benefits and objectives of the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program. This is in line with research findings that show that the mass media plays a significant role in shaping public perception, attitudes, and support for a government policy or program if the information is conveyed transparently and relevant (Rahman & Putra, 2024).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of research and discussion on the perceptions of the people of Kuningan Regency regarding the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program through news reports in the mass media, it can be concluded that the community generally has a fairly good understanding of the objectives, targets, and benefits of the program. This understanding was formed through a process of perception gained from news reports in the mass media. Information that is

presented clearly, is relevant to the needs of the community, and is accompanied by real-life examples makes it easier for the community to understand the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program.

Regarding the implementation of the Free Nutritious Meals Program, the public response has been positive. The community considers this program to be a beneficial step by the government in helping to meet the nutritional needs of school children and easing the economic burden on families. However, this positive response is accompanied by a critical and realistic attitude. The community's experience with previous government programs has led them to hope that the Free Nutritious Meals Program will be implemented consistently, accurately, and sustainably, and not just limited to media coverage.

The mass media also plays an important role in shaping public perception of the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program. The mass media serves as a primary source of information, an educational target, and a tool of persuasion that influences public opinion and attitudes. Therefore, researchers are advised to expand the scope of their research, and the government and mass media are advised to continue to improve their communication strategies to be more transparent and participatory so that public support and trust in the Government's Free Nutritious Meals Program can be maintained.

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