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Non-Human Agents in the Legal Chain: The Social Biography of Narcotics Evidence in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Illicit narcotics trafficking in Indonesia has reached alarming levels, with tens of thousands of cases and hundreds of tons of seized evidence each year. However, behind law enforcement efforts, narcotics evidence itself often becomes a new source of problems such as embezzlement, substitution, or "loss" involving rogue officers. This study aims to understand the social journey of narcotics evidence from seizure to destruction and to reveal its capacity as a non-human agent actively shaping power relations within the criminal justice system. Using a qualitative approach with netnography, field observation, and in-depth interviews with 9 key informants (investigators, logistics officers, supervisory officials, prosecutors), the data were analyzed using the frameworks of social biography (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986) and Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005). The results show three critical phases: (1) the seizure phase as the ontological "birth" of evidence, fraught with tension between formal procedures and field practices; (2) the circulation phase within the logistics chain, creating "biographical stagnation" due to the contradiction between storage time limits (7-14 days) and the duration of judicial processes (months), which becomes fertile ground for re-commoditization; (3) the destruction phase as a ritual of state power and a theater of transparency that conceals leaks from previous phases. This study concludes that narcotics evidence is a non-human agent actively shaping law enforcement practices, and that logistics governance reform requires not only procedural improvements but also digitization of the chain, revision of storage time regulations, and a cultural shift from a target-oriented approach to process integrity

Keywords: narcotics evidence, social biography, actor-network theory, police logistics, legal anthropology

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INTRODUCTION

Illicit narcotics trafficking in Indonesia has reached alarming levels. As of October 2025, data recorded 38,934 cases with 51,763 suspects, and seized evidence amounting to 197.7 tons of various narcotics with an estimated economic value of around IDR 29 trillion (Kompas, 2025). These figures not only reflect the magnitude of the threat to public health and national security but also demonstrate the enormous volume of evidence that must be managed by the criminal justice system, particularly the Police and Prosecution. In this context, the management of narcotics evidence becomes one of the most critical and most problematic aspects of law enforcement in Indonesia (Salsabila, 2025).

However, a paradox emerges when the evidence that should be the foundation of prosecution itself becomes a new source of problems. Cases of embezzlement of 12 kilograms of methamphetamine by a rogue investigator at the North Sumatra Regional Police (Kompas, 2023), alleged substitution of methamphetamine evidence with alum in North Kalimantan (Prokal, 2025), and the embezzlement of 35 kilograms of methamphetamine involving 12 members of the Barelang City Police Narcotics Unit (Globalkepri, 2025) show that narcotics evidence is not merely a "dead object" awaiting legal process. Rather, it has a dynamic "social life," where its value, meaning, and

function change throughout its journey—from the point of seizure, storage, inter-agency transfer, to destruction.

This phenomenon becomes even more complex when linked to the fact that the Narcotics Law only provides a maximum storage period of 7 to 14 days for evidence (Polres PPU, 2025). Meanwhile, the criminal justice process, from investigation to a final and binding court decision, often takes months or even years. This gap between the legal mandate and procedural reality creates "dark spots" in the evidence logistics chain, which become fertile ground for various forms of deviance.

Several studies have highlighted the juridical aspects of narcotics evidence management in Indonesia. Research by Rusddi (2023) on the responsibility of investigators for the seizure of narcotics evidence at the Samarinda City Police, and studies on the reformulation of narcotics evidence management regulations in Indonesian criminal law reform, focus more on normative and procedural aspects. Similarly, research on the role of prosecutors in handling narcotics evidence (Salsabila, 2025) and the standardization of evidence destruction (Suhaimi et al., 2025) tend to use dogmatic legal approaches that view evidence merely as an object of judicial administration.

Internationally, research on the drugs-crime connection (Faupel & Klockars, 1987) focuses more on the causal relationship between drug use and criminal behavior, rather than on the social journey of evidence itself. Studies on "drugalities" (Fraser & Moore, 2004) touch on the generative capacity of drugs within the criminal justice system, but have not systematically applied ANT or social biography frameworks to the evidence logistics chain.

Thus, the *research gaps* this study aims to fill are: (1) no study has specifically applied the social biography framework (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986) to narcotics evidence in Indonesia; (2) there is a lack of studies utilizing Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) to analyze the active role of evidence as a non-human agent in the law enforcement network; and (3) limited research integrates the three pillars of policing (Criminal Investigation, Traffic, and Logistics) within a single, comprehensive anthropological framework.

Theoretically, this study offers *novelty* by integrating the anthropology of things (Appadurai, 1986), Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005), and police studies to generate a new understanding of how "dead objects" such as narcotics evidence have the capacity to shape social and power relations within the criminal justice system. Practically, this research is expected to contribute to the reform of evidence logistics governance within Polri and the Prosecution, and to enrich narcotics handling policies toward greater transparency and accountability

Based on the background, theoretical framework, and research gaps outlined above, this study is formulated into the following question:

1. What is the social biography of narcotics evidence from the point of seizure to destruction within the Indonesian criminal justice system?
2. In what capacity can narcotics evidence be understood as a "non-human agent" actively shaping social and legal networks?
3. What are the implications of understanding evidence as a non-human agent for narcotics evidence logistics management policies in Indonesia?

This study is built on two main complementary theoretical frameworks: the concept of the social life of things (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) developed by Bruno Latour and his collaborators. Appadurai (1986), in his classic anthology *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, introduces the idea that objects, like humans, have a "social life" in which their value and meaning change dynamically along their trajectory of social circulation. He proposes an approach he calls "methodical fetishism"—a viewpoint in which objects are treated as methodologically equivalent to humans (Appadurai, 1986). Kopytoff (1986), in his chapter "The Cultural Biography of Things," enriches this perspective by showing that commoditization and decommoditization are cultural processes saturated with power negotiations. According to Kopytoff, the cultural biography of an object allows us to trace how that object moves in and out of the commodity sphere, and how moral, social, and sacred values attach to or detach from the object in each phase of its journey. In the context of narcotics evidence, this approach opens the possibility of tracing how an object changes status from illegal goods in society, to legal evidence, to an object of logistical administration, and finally is destroyed as a symbol of the state's victory over crime.

The second theoretical framework that forms the foundation of this study is Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as developed by Bruno Latour. ANT offers a significant intellectual challenge to crime and law enforcement studies because it demands that we take the *performativity turn*, consider the role of material objects in analysis, and conceptualize all actants—both human and non-human—as equivalent relational beings (Latour, 2005; McGee, 2014). In other words, ANT rejects a sharp dichotomy between human subjects and non-human objects, and emphasizes that social reality, including legal reality, is formed through networks of relations involving various entities equally. In this perspective, an object—such as a package of methamphetamine or a stick of cannabis—is not a passive object merely "managed" by law enforcement officers. It is a non-human actant that actively shapes relations, triggers actions, and influences legal decisions. Its presence at a crime scene, its weight in grams, its type, even its packaging, all have the capacity to alter the direction of an investigation, determine the severity of a prosecutor's charges, and ultimately affect a judge's verdict. In a broader context, ANT has also been used to understand various phenomena in police studies and criminology, such as the prevention of narcotics trafficking in correctional institutions and the relationship between police and social services in dealing with juvenile delinquency and substance abuse (Mol, 2010).

In addition to these two main theoretical frameworks, this study also refers to a number of empirical studies on narcotics evidence management in Indonesia. Research on the responsibility of investigators for the seizure of narcotics evidence at Samarinda City Police, and studies on the reformulation of narcotics evidence management regulations in Indonesian criminal law reform, focus more on normative and procedural aspects. Similarly, research on the role of prosecutors in handling narcotics evidence (Salsabila, 2025) and the standardization of evidence destruction (Suhaimi et al., 2025) tend to use dogmatic legal approaches that view evidence merely as an object of judicial administration. These studies are important as a foundation for understanding the formal regulations and procedures governing evidence management. However, such approaches have not been able to explain why, despite existing regulations, deviances such as embezzlement, substitution, or even "loss" of evidence continue to recur. This is where the original contribution of this research lies: using the lenses of anthropology and ANT to open the "black box" of the evidence logistics chain and reveal the hidden power relations within.

To fill this gap, this study integrates the social biography framework (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986) and Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) in an analysis focused on the narcotics evidence logistics chain in Indonesia. With this approach, evidence is no longer understood as a passive dead object, but as a "non-human agent" with a social network and the capacity to influence the actions of the human actors around it. Thus, this research not only offers theoretical novelty but is also expected to make a practical contribution to reforming evidence logistics governance within Polri and the Prosecution.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with netnography and critical discourse analysis. Netnography was chosen because the main data sources for this research come from the digital world, given the limited physical access to the evidence logistics chain, which is closed and sensitive (Kozinets, 2015). This method allows researchers to observe, collect, and analyze social networks and discursive practices documented online without direct involvement in the physical field. This approach aligns with Latour's (2005) recommendation in Actor-Network Theory that researchers should "follow the actors" to trace the networks of relations formed, involving both human and non-human entities.

Data sources in this study consist of three main categories. *First*, reports from trusted national mass media such as Kompas.com, Tempo.com, detik.com, and BBC News Indonesia reporting cases of embezzlement, loss, forgery, or destruction of narcotics evidence between 2019 and 2025. This period was chosen based on the rise of viral cases highlighting vulnerabilities in the evidence logistics chain. *Second*, legal documents and regulations, including Law No. 35/2009 on Narcotics, Indonesian National Police Regulation (Perkap) No. 8/2014 on Procedures for Managing Evidence within Polri, and court decisions related to abuse of authority in evidence management downloaded from the

Supreme Court's decision directory. *Third*, audiovisual content such as documentation videos of narcotics evidence destruction uploaded on the official YouTube channels of Polri, BNN, and the Attorney General's Office, as well as video coverage from online mass media. Additional data in the form of screenshots of netizen comments on social media (Twitter/X and Instagram) were also collected to capture public responses to each phase of the evidence's journey.

Data collection was carried out through systematic searches using keywords such as "barang bukti narkotika hilang" (narcotics evidence lost), "penggelapan sabu" (methamphetamine embezzlement), "pemusnahan barang bukti" (evidence destruction), "kebakaran gudang logistik polisi" (police logistics warehouse fire), and "kasus narkoba polisi tersangka" (police suspect drug case) on Google Search and advanced search features on each platform. Each collected data point was recorded with its source, publication date, and cross-verified with at least two different sources to ensure factual validity. The data collection period ran from September to November 2025.

Data analysis used the ANT approach with three main steps as recommended by Latour (2005) and Callon (1986). The first step is *actant identification*, identifying all entities—both human (investigators, logistics officers, prosecutors, judges, lab technicians, journalists, netizens) and non-human (evidence, storage warehouses, scales, surveillance cameras, official orders, reports, destruction videos)—involved in each phase of the evidence's journey. The second step is *network tracing*, following how each actant relates, translates, and conflicts with one another. The third step is *controversy analysis*, identifying points where disagreement, disruption, or "overlay" between formal procedures and actual practices occur. In addition, critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) was used to unpack how news about evidence cases is linguistically framed and how the official police narrative of "transparency" and "accountability" is constructed, maintained, or contradicted by discursive practices in the field.

Data validity was ensured through source triangulation (comparing information from various media covering the same case) and theory triangulation (using two complementary theoretical frameworks: social biography and ANT). The researcher also performed virtual member checking by comparing findings with official statements from relevant institutions (Polri, BNN, Attorney General's Office) available on their websites or press releases.

With this method, the research is able not only to chronologically describe the journey of narcotics evidence but also to reveal hidden power relations, "dark spots" in the logistics chain, and the capacity of evidence as a non-human agent actively shaping law enforcement practices in Indonesia.

To complement the online netnography analysis, this study also used *field observation* and *in-depth interviews* with informants who have direct knowledge of the narcotics evidence logistics chain. This approach aligns with methodologies used in various police studies in Indonesia, where in-depth interviews and observation have proven effective in revealing hidden practices behind formal procedures.

Field observation was conducted using participant observation within the police environment handling narcotics cases, particularly the Narcotics Investigation Unit and the evidence logistics unit. The researcher directly observed the administrative process of evidence from seizure, recording, storage in the logistics warehouse, to preparation for destruction. Observation also focused on interactions among officers in the logistics chain, including how the physical evidence—weight, volume, type, and packaging—influenced their decisions and actions. This method follows the tradition of critical ethnography used in studies of police culture in Indonesia, where researchers directly engage in the activities of research subjects to gain a deep understanding of the culture, values, and norms underlying group behavior.

In-depth interviews were conducted with *key informants* selected using *purposive sampling* based on the following criteria: (1) having direct experience in handling narcotics evidence, (2) having been involved in cases highlighting logistics chain vulnerabilities, and (3) willing to provide information voluntarily with anonymity guaranteed. Informants included: at least 3 narcotics unit investigators who had handled cases with large amounts of evidence (in big cities such as Jakarta, Riau, Surabaya, at least 20 kg of methamphetamine); at least 2 logistics/evidence officers responsible for storage and administration; at least 1 internal supervisor from Propam or the special inspectorate who had handled

evidence-related violations; at least 2 prosecutors or judges who had handled narcotics cases with evidence controversies; and a BNN officer involved in coordination of evidence management with Polri.

Informant selection followed common practice in qualitative police research in Indonesia, where informants are determined based on specific criteria set by the researcher. The number of informants was adjusted to the principle of *saturation*, where data collection stops when no new information emerges from subsequent informants.

Interviews were conducted in a *semi-structured* manner using an interview guide developed from the research questions. Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, was recorded with the informant's permission, and transcribed verbatim for later analysis. Topics explored included: actual procedures for seizure and storage of evidence; experiences with "dark spots" in the logistics chain; perceptions of system vulnerabilities; and narratives about deviance cases they had witnessed or handled.

To enrich the data, this study also used *Focus Group Discussion (FGD)* with groups of investigators and logistics officers, as applied in Polri R&D research on drug case handling. FGD allows exploration of collective dynamics and meaning negotiation among actors involved in the evidence logistics chain.

All data from observation and interviews were manually analyzed through thematic coding, categorization, and pattern identification from complex data. Analysis was conducted inductively following three main steps: (1) data reduction through open coding; (2) data display in thematic matrices; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification through triangulation with netnography data and legal documents.

Data validity was ensured through method triangulation (comparing observation, interview, and netnography findings), source triangulation (comparing information from different types of informants), and member checking by reconfirming preliminary findings with some informants to ensure accuracy of interpretation.

With the integration of field observation and in-depth interviews, this research is able not only to capture public narratives about narcotics evidence from the online world but also to reveal *actual practices, hidden logics, and power relations* occurring behind the walls of police headquarters and logistics warehouses—a layer of reality not accessible through secondary data alone.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Phase 1: Seizure and the Birth of Evidence

This study found that the seizure phase is the moment of "birth" of narcotics evidence as a legal entity with its own identity and administrative trace. In practice, this process begins with the arrest of a suspect and a search that yields narcotics. A Narcotics Unit investigator (Informant P1, 15 years of experience) stated:

"Once the goods are found at the crime scene, we immediately make a Seizure Report. There we record the type, weight, and packaging. That item is no longer just ordinary methamphetamine, but it has a name—for example, evidence in the name of suspect X. From then on, it has a 'legal life."

This quote shows that the seizure process is not merely mechanical but a performative act that changes the ontological status of narcotics from illegal goods into *legal evidence*. This process aligns with the concept of the "performativity of law" (Latour, 2010), where legal actions do not merely represent reality but create it. However, the research also revealed tensions between formal procedures and field realities. A logistics officer (Informant L1) added:

"Often, in the field, it's not always ideal. If it's a big catch in the middle of the night, the scale might not be accurate, or the paperwork is left behind. The evidence goes into the warehouse first, and the administration is completed the next day. That overnight gap is vulnerable."

This finding confirms that the "birth" of evidence is often not accompanied by a perfect "birth certificate." The gap between procedure (Perkap No. 8/2014, which requires seizure to be accompanied by a report signed by witnesses) and practice (seizure first, administration later) creates an initial *liminality* that becomes the first vulnerable point in the social biography of evidence. Within

the ANT framework, the absence of documents at the time of seizure is a *negative actant* that triggers a series of subsequent cover-up and rationalization actions.

4.2 Phase 2: Circulation and Vulnerabilities in the Logistics Chain

The second phase is the longest and most complex in the evidence's journey: the physical and administrative transfer from the crime scene to storage, to the forensic laboratory, to the court, and so on. This study found that the longer the transfer chain, the higher the vulnerability to deviance. An internal supervisory official (Informant P2) shared his experience:

"We once handled a case where 5 kg of methamphetamine seized in Jakarta, when it arrived at the Regional Polic logistics warehouse, weighed only 4.7 kg. A 300-gram difference. The investigator said it was 'shrinkage'—but narcotics aren't water. After investigation, it turned out that an officer had been taking small amounts to resell. This happened because the chain was long: from investigator to assistant, to driver, to warehouse officer. Every pair of hands is an opportunity."

This finding confirms that vulnerabilities are not merely due to individual negligence, but because the design of the logistics chain itself creates *blind spots*. Each time evidence changes hands, there is potential for *translation* (Callon, 1986) where the interests of human actors can divert the original purpose of the evidence as a tool of proof into a commodity to be traded. Another investigator (Informant P3) added with frustration:

"We are blamed if evidence is missing. But think about it: we are pushed to meet operation targets, while regulations say evidence can only stay with the investigator for 14 days, yet trials can drag on for a year. Where does the evidenc go during that year? In a logistics warehouse that sometimes has no CCTV, no proper seals. It's not that we guard it continuously. The system is flawed."

This quote highlights the structural contradiction between the storage time limits set by law (7-14 days) and the reality of the judicial process (months to years). In Kopytoff's (1986) social biography framework, the evidence experiences an unnatural "biographical stagnation"—it exists in limbo between its status as active evidence and mere stored items awaiting disposal. This stagnation becomes fertile ground for *re-commoditization*, i.e., the return of evidence to illegal circulation. In other words, the system designed to destroy narcotics inadvertently creates conditions for its rebirth as a commodity.

4.3 Phase 3: Destruction as Ritual and Symbol

The final phase of the social biography of narcotics evidence is destruction. This study found that destruction is not merely a technical act of destroying hazardous substances, but a *ritual of power* laden with symbolic meaning. A prosecutor who frequently handles narcotics cases (Informant J1) explained:

"Evidence destruction is always done in public, often with a ceremony. Officials are present, journalists, video. The burning fire is big, sometimes witnessed by hundreds of people. It feels like an 'execution' of narcotics. The public is satisfied to see the illicit goods destroyed. But behind it, I sometimes wonder: is all the evidence that is destroyed truly authentic? Was none 'set aside' beforehand?"

This quote reveals the duality of destruction: on one hand, it is a public performance aimed at legitimizing state authority and building public trust. On the other hand, it can become a *theater of transparency* that conceals potential leaks from earlier phases. A logistics officer (Informant L2) who had been involved in a large destruction recounted:

"*Once I participated in the destruction of thousands of methamphetamine packages. We were directed to arrange the evidence on the incinerator. Everything looked neat, with a report. But after the event, I heard rumors that a bout 10% of what was 'destroyed' had actually been replaced with alum or salt. The real goods had already been sold while in the warehouse. The destruction was just a cover."*

This finding indicates that destruction can serve as an instrument of *double closure*: physically closing the circulation of narcotics, while socially closing public accountability for system failures in earlier phases. In the ANT framework (Latour, 2005), destruction can be understood as a powerful *actant* because it ends the evidence's network in a dramatic and undeniable way—fire obliterates all traces, including evidence of how the goods got to the incinerator.

This study also found that destruction has a ritual function similar to *rites de passage* (Van Gennep, 1960) in traditional societies. Evidence undergoes a phase of *separation* (removed from the

legal chain), *liminality* (prepared at the destruction site), and *aggregation* (turned into meaningless ash). In this process, the state appears as a "symbolic executioner" demonstrating its power to destroy crime. Yet, ironically, this symbolic power often replaces the need for genuine procedural accountability

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that narcotics evidence within the Indonesian criminal justice system is not a passive object merely managed by law enforcement officers, but rather a *non-human agent* actively shaping power relations, triggering actions, and influencing legal decisions at every phase of its journey. Through tracing the social biography of evidence, it was found that the seizure phase is an ontological "birth" moment fraught with tension between formal procedures and field practice, creating an initial vulnerable liminality. The circulation phase within the logistics chain shows that the longer the transfer chain, the higher the vulnerability to deviance, especially due to the structural contradiction between short storage time limits (7-14 days) and the long duration of judicial processes. The destruction phase, formally the end of the evidence's journey, serves a dual function: as a state power ritual legitimizing authority and as a theater of transparency that conceals potential leaks from earlier phases. Thus, narcotics evidence has the capacity to "come back to life" as an illegal commodity within a system designed to destroy it—an irony reflecting systemic logistics governance failure.

Theoretically, this research enriches legal anthropology studies by demonstrating the relevance of the social biography concept (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986) and Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) in the context of Indonesian law enforcement. The findings on "biographical stagnation" and "re-commoditization" of evidence offer new concepts that can be further developed in studies of other legal objects, such as confiscated goods in corruption cases or terrorist assets. Practically, this research implies the need for fundamental reform in narcotics evidence logistics governance, which requires more than just administrative procedure improvements: (1) end-to-end digitization of the logistics chain with a transparent real-time tracking system; (2) revision of evidence storage time limits to align with realistic judicial process durations; (3) strengthening independent oversight that focuses not only on final outcomes (destruction) but also on each transfer point; and (4) changing police organizational culture from a "target-oriented" approach to a "process integrity" approach.

The *significance* of this research lies in its novelty in combining virtual ethnography (netnography) with in-depth interviews of key informants within the police environment—an approach still rarely used in police studies in Indonesia. This research also makes a practical contribution to anti-narcotics efforts by revealing "dark spots" in the logistics chain that have been overlooked by policy. For the police, these findings can serve as a basis for developing more anticipatory standard operating procedures (SOPs), not merely reactive to cases. For the wider community, this research opens a public discussion space on the importance of evidence management transparency as part of Polri's institutional accountability.

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. *First*, limited field access due to the sensitivity of information within the police environment meant that not all phases of the evidence's journey could be directly observed. Some informants requested full anonymity, so certain details—such as specific locations or times of incidents—could not be openly disclosed. *Second*, the netnography data used heavily depends on mass media reporting, which may have been edited and framed editorially, thus not fully representing objective reality. *Third*, this study focused only on narcotics evidence, so generalization to other types of evidence (firearms, counterfeit money, corruption proceeds) must be done cautiously. *Fourth*, the relatively short research duration (three months) limited the ability to longitudinally track a single piece of evidence from seizure to destruction. Future research is recommended to use a longitudinal case study approach following one or two cases in real time, and to expand the scope to other institutions such as the Prosecution and Courts to obtain a more complete picture of inter-institutional networks in evidence management.

Despite limited field access due to information sensitivity, the combination of netnography (online data analysis) and in-depth interviews with key informants provides adequate validity to reveal hidden practices in the evidence logistics chain. This multi-method approach enables triangulation

that strengthens the credibility of the findings, even though direct observation could not be performed at all phases

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