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EXAMINING ISSUES IN INDONESIA'S PUBLIC COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Indonesian government issued various policies to keep the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic under control as cases fluctuated during the outbreak. However, the public communication strategies used by the government to handle the pandemic have not been effective, while effective communication is vital in fostering understanding and trust, as well as in maintaining people's risk perception. The government's public communication during the pandemic had a number of issues, such as (i) discordant messages delivered by government officials; (ii) messages with the potential for causing confusion; (iii) positive narratives that boast the country's success in handling the pandemic but have the potential of creating a false sense of security; and (iv) diverse creative communication strategies across regions with varying levels of effectiveness.

THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The COVID-19 pandemic had lasted for more than a year when this study was completed and since the government announced the first reported case in Indonesia in March 2020 (Berty, 2020). The situation was constantly changing and the number of positive cases fluctuated. The first peak of COVID-19 cases in Indonesia—89,902 in the number of weekly cases—happened in January 2021. Then, there was a decreasing trend for 15 weeks. In June 2021, however, the second wave of COVID-19 hit the country (Satuan Tugas Penanganan COVID-19[1], 2021). The weekly cases at the second peak (125,393 cases) far exceeded the first peak (89,902 cases). The government and epidemiologists warned against the potential of a third wave of COVID-19 (Farmita, 2021).

The government issued various policies to control the pandemic. However, the implementation of health protocols faced many challenges. For example, the level of compliance with the regulation of double masking and social distancing was still low compared to the level of compliance with the regulation of hand washing with soap or using hand sanitizers (Badan Pusat Statistik[2], 2021). This indicates that the government's public communication has been ineffective in supporting efforts to control the pandemic, while public communication is expected to develop people's understanding about the risks everyone faces and the habits to adopt during the pandemic. Moreover, public communication plays a role in building the public's trust in the government's policies and capability in handling the pandemic, as well as preventing distress.

This brief highlights several issues concerning the Indonesian government's public communication strategies for handling the COVID-19 pandemic and offers recommendations. To identify the issues, we reflect on the findings of the study that The SMERU Research Institute conducted on the sociocultural resilience of vulnerable groups in facing the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was conducted from April 2020 to June 2021. Lessons learned from the communication strategies used during the pandemic will contribute to the improvement of future strategies. This is an important step because the condition of a community can have an effect on the number of cases and when a third or even subsequent wave will hit (Ika, 2021).

DISCORDANT MESSAGES DELIVERED BY GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

We find that during the COVID-19 pandemic, government officials delivered contrasting messages. For example, from 14 September 2020 to 25 September 2020, the DKI Jakarta Provincial Government reenacted the Large-scale Social Restrictions (PSBB) that was implemented at the beginning of the pandemic (BBC News Indonesia, 2020) and not the transitional PSBB. Public health risks and the capacity of health facilities were the bases for the decision (Satuan Tugas Penanganan COVID-19, 2020a). The decision received negative

reactions and heavy criticism (CNBC Indonesia, 2020) because (i) of the effect it would have on the economy (Arief and Prakoso, 2020), (ii) it was taken without coordination (JPNN, 2020), and (iii) it was not in line with the central government's policy. Such display of conflicting messages between government officials also appeared at the provincial level. One example is the conflicting messages delivered by the East Java Governor and Surabaya Mayor about PSBB, the handling of COVID-19 patients, and provision of cars for polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests in East Java (Aria, 2020). Similar issues appear at the national and regional levels, such as inconsistencies regarding the homecoming travel ban, polemic about opening tourist spots, and debates about vaccines.

The different priorities in information and directives that government officials gave out during the pandemic reflect the tug of war between government actors, where each put their own interest at the forefront. This situation has the potential of confusing the public regarding priorities during the pandemic and even causing conflict within the community. It may furthermore cause people to develop a partial understanding concerning the risks of and ways to handle the pandemic, which can lead to mass confusion. Ultimately, this situation may create a false sense of security (Fillaili and Tamyis, 2020).

In their execution of public communication, all government actors must realize that their opinion and approach can intentionally or unintentionally cause people to develop their own assumptions. To avoid actions or opinions with multiple interpretations or that contradict the message the government wants to convey, the communication between channels, between actors, and between different levels of the government needs intensive coordination in order to be consistent. Each actor in the government needs to understand the importance of caution and coordination when expressing an opinion related to a policy. Institutionalizing communication during the COVID-19 pandemic requires depoliticization of health communication and limiting the number of institutions/ people who are authorized to disseminate the messages (Ontario Hospital Association, 2021). A time of crisis, such as the pandemic, presents a platform to build public trust. However, the government could lose this trust if appointed officials turn out to be political pawns and their credibility is questioned (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021).

MESSAGES WITH THE POTENTIAL TO CAUSE CONFUSION

Public communication in times of crisis (including the COVID-19 pandemic) is needed to provide information on what to do and what to avoid so that people are less anxious, as well as to prevent disturbances. Inconsistent messages are unavoidable because of the rapidly changing situation throughout the pandemic (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021). People are fed with many new terms about health protocols[3], handling of patients[4], efforts to cut spread and transmission[5], social/activity restrictions[6], or new or popular words and phrases that often accompany the enactment of new policies and escalation of cases[7].

[1] COVID-19 National Task Force.

[2] Statistics Indonesia.

[3] An example is the use of the term "5M" which refers to *memakai masker* (wearing a face mask), *mencuci tangan dengan sabun* (washing hands with soap), *menjaga jarak* (social distancing), *mengurangi mobilitas* (minimizing movement), and *menghindari kerumunan* (avoiding crowds).

[4] Some examples include "*orang dalam pemantauan* (ODP) or person under monitoring", "*pasien dalam pengawasan* (PDP) or patient under observation", and "*orang tanpa gejala* (OTG) or person without symptoms". These three terminologies were then changed to "*kasus suspek* or suspect case", "*kasus probable* or probable case", "*kasus konfirmasi* or confirmed case", and "*kontak erat* or close contact". The changes are stipulated in the Minister of Health Decree No. HK.01.07/MENKES/413/2020 on Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19).

[5] One example is the use of the term "3T", which stands for testing (action to test for COVID-19 infection), tracing (tracing and locating close contacts), and treatment (treatment of COVID-19 patients).

[6] One example is the evolution of the term from PSBB to Public Activity Restrictions (PPKM) Across Java-Bali and its derivatives, such as PPKM *mikro* (micro), PPKM *darurat* (emergency), and PPKM level 1–4. Another example is the introduction of new normal, which was then changed to Adapting to New Habits (AKB).

[7] There are hundreds of foreign terms related to COVID-19 needed to be translated into Indonesian (Larasati, 2020).

The use of and changes in pandemic-related terms, on the one hand, show that there have been new developments in knowledge, needs, and policy adaptation in line with the development of the pandemic. However, we cannot deny that the community, as well as those assigned to implement the policies, are made confused and overwhelmed by so many new terms. People are hit by an "infodemic", which is the spread of information (including hoaxes) that is rapid and far-reaching (World Health Organization, 2021). If the public do not know the meaning of various terms or cannot distinguish between real and fake news, we cannot expect them to have a high risk perception about the transmission and spread of COVID-19 and to participate in the pandemic mitigation.

Both the government and the nongovernmental bodies have made various efforts to disseminate information and educate the public. However, not all individuals/groups in the community can equally benefit from the educational information. This is due to discrepancies in their capacity to absorb the information as well as the unfavorable circumstances they face in terms of internet access and information availability. To address this situation, these bodies should hold regular dissemination and education activities. The consistency of messages and terms also need attention. People need to be involved to ensure that the information reaches even the smallest community unit. Strengthening people's participation can be done by strengthening the role of the agencies and actors from various religious, economic, and social groups within the community (Fillaili and Tamyis, 2020).

POSITIVE NARRATIVES AND POTENTIAL FOR FALSE SENSE OF SECURITY

For more than a year, various types of information about the pandemic have circulated, including narratives about the success in controlling the spread of the virus. These narratives appear not only in the information and policy disseminated by the government, but also in the form of information that the people themselves created and spread. Information such as the recovery rate, reduction in the mortality rate, reduction in the number of active cases, regional zoning policy (Arifin, 2020), and campaign for the adaptation of new habits (Satuan Tugas Penanganan COVID-19, 2020b) will foster optimism and provide insight to people about the situation in their areas. Moreover, public trust in the ability of the government in handling the crisis will increase. On the other hand, such information can make people think they are safe and not vulnerable to infection or transmission, resulting in a false sense of security and low risk perception.

Honest, open, and sincere communication is one of the principles of effective communication that needs to be applied in the context of the pandemic. It is important to construct a narrative that explains the reason behind a policy and also not to sugarcoat news. People need to get sufficient information, both positive and negative, so that they have measured concern (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021). The narratives containing the latest information needs to be delivered openly and consistently to ensure that the people's risk perception of COVID-19 transmission and spread remains high and appropriate (Fillaili and Tamyis, 2020).

DIVERSE LEVELS OF CREATIVITY IN DESIGNING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL

The presence of the regional COVID-19 task forces demonstrates that there is room for creativity and innovation to accommodate the need for, and issues related to, different communication strategies tailored to each region. At the *kabupaten/kota* level, the COVID-19 task forces make use of multiple communication channels to deliver messages about health protocols. In general, task forces in the *kabupaten/kota* make use of websites, social media accounts, regional radio and television channels, and advertisements in public spaces.

The diverse communication techniques and channels show the regions' creativity in opening access to information to a wide range of people. This access to information can help improve people's risk perception during the pandemic. The study findings show that creativity in communication strategies varies in the regions. Some regions show a higher level of creativity than others. This is reflected, among others, in the variety of (i) activities to promote compliance with health protocols;[8] (ii) collaborations with various parties to disseminate information and evaluate the communication strategies;[9] (iii) methods used for health protocol monitoring and for educating the public at public facilities; and (iv) types, depth, and up-to-dateness of the information conveyed through multiple communication channels.[10]

Creativity in delivering messages on pandemic mitigation is important. It needs to be continued and improved to (i) ensure that the communication strategies are always in sync with the dynamics of people's risk perception; (ii) accommodate the diverse conditions and needs in the community so that communication strategies are inclusive to all groups, including vulnerable groups; and (iii) ensure a more creative strategy in disseminating information in pace with changes occurring throughout the pandemic. A region's level of creativity in formulating and executing communication strategies contributes to how effective the communication is. The varying effectiveness levels across regions can result in people having various risk perceptions; some high, while others low or decreasing.

Collaboration between multiple parties can foster creativity in revamping the communication strategies at the regional level. The government, media, academia, business owners, and the community (also called the pentahelix model) need to collaborate to share knowledge, skills, and resources to create and run more creative communication strategies to control the pandemic in each region. Joining forces is imperative during the pandemic. All parties need to perceive that the pandemic can be managed if everyone works together. In the course of the pandemic, the government has the role of promoting solidarity and uniting all the said forces.

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[8] There are regions that display banners about the health protocols in various spots at the vilage/*kelurahan* level; make use of the vans that routinely make the rounds to multiple hangout spots to campaign for the health protocols; play recordings of health protocol messages over a loudspeaker at traffic lights; and others.

[9] Some regional governments have collaborated with the community information group (KIM) and universities to formulate and employ certain communication strategies, while some others still rely on the regional government's internal resources.

[10] Even though all *kabupaten/kota* have their own website to inform the latest development in the fight against COVID-19, the types, depth, and up-to-dateness of the information vary between *kabupaten/kota*.

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