

APPROPRIATE PUBLIC COMMUNICATION FOR THE COMMUNITY IN HANDLING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN BATU BARA DISTRICT, NORTH SUMATERA PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT. Communication and media are important in conveying public communication messages in an effort to overcome the Covid-19 pandemic in Batu Bara District, North Sumatera. To implement public communication during the Covid-19 pandemic, the policy must be able to provide the right choice for the people there. The research questions include, is the public communication policy that has been carried out by the local government in accordance with the expectations of the public in Batu Bara District? Next, what is the public communication model carried out by the local government, including its regent in handling Covid-19 in Batu Bara District? The research uses a qualitative approach and data collection techniques using Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The FGD participants consisted of the regent, and staff and residents of the local community whom we chose separately. The results of the FGD revealed that residents recognized from mass media reports and social media that conveyed that Batu Bara District managed to become one of the best districts in handling Covid-19 and received an award from the Governor of North Sumatera. Some residents expressed, "*We expect our father (regent) to be among us*". The regent added that for areas far from the district, Covid information was conveyed through religious leaders and community leaders in the village. This is also an appropriate model of public communication, because the local government gives a significant social role to religious leaders and community leaders as an extension of the district government in conveying information related to Covid-19.

KEYWORDS: public communication; covid-19; Batu Bara District; North Sumatera Province

1. INTRODUCTION

This series of public communication policy research in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic in Batu Bara District is certainly inseparable from the global phenomenon since December 2019. The end of 2019 the world is in the grip of an unprecedented crisis in the memory of human life today. In its history, the world has experienced several pandemics such as the Spanish flu (H1N1) in 1918 which caused about 50 million deaths, the Asian flu (H2N2) in 1957 with 1.5 million deaths, the Hong Kong flu (H3N2) in 1968 which claimed the lives of about 1 million lives (R. K. Dewi, 2021).

To date, Covid-19 has infected more than 200 million people across the country with a death rate of more than 4 million people (Our World in Data, 2021 accessed on October 16, 2021). Meanwhile, the Covid-19 case in Indonesia was confirmed for the first time on March 2, 2020, which was officially conveyed by President Joko Widodo and thereafter consistently continued to show an upward trend. On April 17, 2020, the central government issued Presidential Decree Number 12 of 2020 which stipulated Indonesia's current situation as a non-natural national disaster due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Referring to the data displayed by the covid19.go.id page (accessed on October 19, 2021) Covid-19 has infected as many as 4,235,384 Indonesians with a death toll of 142,999 people, although there is a possibility that the number of people infected and died is greater than the data published by the government.

The world is restless in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, which has not been able to be sure when it will end. Currently, the government in every country, including Indonesia, continues to promote

campaigns for the implementation of health protocols, in addition to the vaccination program is also a priority to continue to be intensified to the community, with the hope that it will create herd immunity. The government was criticized for being slow in responding at the beginning of the emergence of Covid-19 (Almuttaqi, 2020; Aziz & Wicaksono, 2020; Juaningsih et al., 2020; Tuwu et al., 2021). The government is considered not swift because it has not prepared adequate information in an effort to deal with the Covid-19 outbreak for the public, because the communication used by the government at that time to provide information related to Covid-19 was only through mass media channels (Aziz & Wicaksono, 2020, p. 195; Goeritman, 2021). Consequently, there is panic, anxiety, and even fear in the midst of society with the Covid-19 issue, so that the phenomenon of 'panic buying' appears (Goeritman, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a far-reaching negative impact on the lives of the global community. In Indonesia, we can see how the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak affects almost all sectors of people's lives. Covid-19 has caused stagnation, recession or depression in the economic sector (Mohammad Ali et al., 2021). On the grounds of suppressing the spread of the virus, the government restricted and even temporarily banned social activities. As a result, economic growth weakened even minus, the closure of tourism and entertainment places, the tightening of the rules of mass transport services, even work and teaching and learning activities had to be carried out at home. In the informal sector. street vendors, online motorcycle taxis, small and medium entrepreneur activists experienced an impact with a significant decrease in their income (Syafri & Hartati, 2020, p. 496).

Facing the current conditions, the government issued various policies in an effort to minimize the impact that occurs due to Covid-19, such as the Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB) policy carried out at the beginning of the emergence of Covid-19 in Indonesia which was later changed to the Implementation of Community Activity Restrictions (PPKM) with various schemes from level 1 to level 4, and travel rules for land, sea and air transportation (Instruction of the Minister of Home Affairs Number 53 and 54/2021).

Communication is important in providing information related to public policies in an effort to overcome the Covid-19 pandemic. The communication model in implementing public policies during the current Covid-19 pandemic must be able to have a positive impact on the wider community. In such a critical situation as it is today, government public communication has an impact and is able to have a fundamental influence in maintaining public health, managing risks and maintaining the trust of the wider community (Goeritman, 2021, p. 2).

Based on the importance of the government in conducting good communication related to public policies in handling Covid-19, this study intends to examine the public policy communication model in handling Covid-19. Public communication is a condition in which a message is created and disseminated to a large number of recipients and in a relatively impersonal atmosphere (Goeritman, 2021; Ruben & Stewart, 2006). Further (Dijkzeul & Moke, 2005; Goeritman, 2021), defines public communication as communication strategies and activities aimed at the target audience, with the aim of providing information and increasing awareness and influencing attitudes or behaviors. Judy Pearson & Paul Nelson (in S. A. E. Dewi, 2021) define public communication as the process of using messages to create common meaning in situations, where the source transforms the message to the recipient and then provides feedback in the form of messages or non-verbal communication or in the form of questions and answers.

This research will take the locus of research in Batu Bara district, North Sumatera. The reason for taking the research area in Batu Bara district is because the researcher wants to know comprehensively the public communication model carried out by the Batu Bara Regency/Regent government. Batu Bara district is one of the regencies that has responded quickly in overcoming the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020, such as revamping hospital facilities, the availability of PCRILaboratory cars, providing social assistance quickly, precisely and evenly, as well as the intensive implementation of vaccinations.

1.1. Problem Formulation

1. Is the public communication policy that has been carried out by the District Government in handling the Covid-19 pandemic in accordance with public expectations in Batu Bara district?

2. What is the public communication strategy of the Batu Bara district government in dealing with Covid-19?
3. What are the suitable public communication channels for coal communities with typical urban and rural communities?

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Public Communication

Public communication has an important role in disseminating information to the wider community. In simple terms, public communication requires the existence of sources, messages and recipients of messages, among which there is a disturbance (S. A. E. Dewi, 2021, p. 164). Public communication has become a strategic management function in recent years. Although public communication is well recognized by various institutions or the private sector, it is often late in the application of its concept (Dijkzeul & Moke, 2005). Likely due to a lack of available literature and limited information about the policies and results of public communication reported by the institution.

Public communication is defined as communication strategies and activities towards the intended audience (Dijkzeul & Moke, 2005, p. 674). Its main objective is to provide information to this audience and to raise awareness and influence attitudes or even behaviors. Public communication is the delivery of messages containing policy information from a source (government) to the recipient (the community) to produce a common meaning (Susanto, 2013 in Febiana, 2021).

Public communication (Harlow, cited in Wilcox et al. 2003: 7 in Theaker, 2004, p. 4) is a special management function that helps establish and maintain lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and mutual cooperation between the organization and its members; involves the management of a problem or issue; help management to stay informed and responsive to public opinion; define and emphasize management's responsibility to serve the public interest; helping management keep up with and make effective use of changes, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and using research and ethical communication techniques as its primary tool.

Public communication must be well planned, because if it is not planned, it will create panic and public distrust. Public communication is built through the right communication strategy (Sulistiyowati & Hasanah, 2021). Public communication as part of a very important government function and should not be ignored (Liu et al, 2012 in Goeritman, 2021, p. 4). Public communication is a strategic and sensitive area for the government to display the image of its government in a positive way (Dijkzeul & Moke, 2005, p. 674). Therefore, the placement and use of public communication must look at the social conditions in society.

2.1.1. Public Communication in Handling Covid-19

The current situation of the Covid-19 pandemic requires an effective public communication model. Mistakes in communication can have a negative impact on the perception and implementation of public policies born by the government. The ability in public communication is one of the important measuring instruments for the government in an effort to overcome the Covid-19 pandemic case (Febiana, 2021, p. 104). An important factor in efforts to deal with Covid-19 with an award for information disclosure that can give rise to public participation (Sulhan, 2020 in Sulistiyowati & Hasanah, 2021, p. 199).

Good public communication in efforts to deal with Covid-19 can be built if there is a communication strategy. Referring to Roger (in Cangara, 2017) that communication strategies are designs that are built to change human behavior through the transfer of new ideas. Middleton further (in Cangara, 2017) explains that the success of the communication strategy requires support from all elements of

communication such as communicators, messages, media, recipients to the impact in achieving optimal communication goals.

The government's efforts and communication in informing public policy can be seen in media reports. Social media and conventional media play an important role as control over policies carried out by the government in handling Covid-19. Public policy is conveyed by the media to the public in order to provide a sense of calm (Dominick, 2009 in Sulistyowati & Hasanah, 2021, p. 201). In channeling public communication related to handling Covid-19, it is important for the government to first do is to improve internal communication. Quoting the opinion of Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2016) (in Aziz & Wicaksono, 2020, p. 203) that internal communication is the main function of government public relations. Although this communication is prevalent in organizations, it carries its own importance in government for two reasons. First, because the dissemination of statements, announcements of policies or actions of the organization to the public is carried out immediately, officials in the organization must know and understand the issue at hand. Second, rumors or half-true news can be detrimental or counter-productive to any organization, yet rumors are clearly disastrous for the government. In addition, various government structures must be able to cooperate with each other because it is important to provide up-to-date information on inter-sectoral activities that are very important for all parties.

3. METHODS

This research uses the qualitative approach needed to answer the problem formulation. This is done to find problems in the field that will provide new understanding for the Batu Bara District Government as an option for problem solving. This research uses qualitative data types, in this case using Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and some triangulation informant.

3.1. Data Collection Techniques

One of the things that affects the quality of the data from the study is the quality of data collection which is related to the accuracy of the ways used to collect data. The data collection techniques here in Darmawan's book (2013) are the ways taken and the tools used by researchers in collecting their data. In this regard, researchers use field research data collection techniques in the form of questionnaires. Here are the data collection techniques carried out in this study:

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

The FGD was conducted to check the data that had been collected from the results of a survey conducted by a research team from the University of North Sumatera. The team thinks it is necessary to deepen the results of the survey through this FGD process. The implementation of the FGD was carried out by a research team from USU. Meanwhile, the participants consisted of the Batu Bara regent (the main resource person) and resource persons related to the survey results consisting of Regional Apparatus Organizations (OPD), sub-districts and sub-districts, Public Relations of Batu Bara regency, Head of Hospital, Covid-19 Task Force, media representatives, representatives of the police / PP police, and representatives of the general public (community leaders, religious leaders, small and medium business actors and fishermen).

3.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data was collected after quantitative data was obtained through field research (survey) in Batu Bara Regency, researcher from the University of North Sumatera (in October-December 2021). Qualitative data collection is carried out through Focus Group Discussion (FGD). After the qualitative data obtained through the FGD, the team then carried out data reduction and data interpretation as generally carried out in qualitative research.

4.2. FGD Results

The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was held on Monday, November 29, 2021, at the Hall of the Batu Bara Regent's Office House which began at 14.45 WIB. The official opening was held at 15.17 PM by the Regional Secretary of Coal, Haji Sakti Alam Siregar. He stated good public communication should be implemented to create a better government in the Batu Bara District Government.

The presentation of the research results was carried out starting at 15.23 PM guided by researchers from USU Emilia Ramadhani, a question and answer session began with a statement from coal public relations, namely Zulkarnain as Head of the Communication and Informatics Service (Kominfo). Zulkarnain stated that the handling activities were included on the website of the Coal Regency Government. Socialization is also carried out on a scheduled basis using the Batu Bara Regency Government radio. The installation of banners and billboards is also carried out in crowded places that are locations for mobility and community interaction. Social media is also used as a means of disseminating information by copying links from valid sources and can be trusted to be true. Kominfo Batu Bara itself has 4 social media that are used to spread a variety of useful information.

Then Mujiono from Simpang Kopi Village stated that usually the community gets information about covid-19 from the Village Head. While radio has been very rarely used to get information because it is rare to have it. He also uses social media to get information about COVID-19. Mujiono stated that he never accessed the Coal Regency Government website because he did not know that the Batu Bara Regency Government had an official website. Mujiono also stated that the people in his area missed the presence of "Our Father", namely the Father of the Batu Bara Regent because their area was very rarely visited by high-ranking officials from the Batu Bara Regency Government.

A different thing was conveyed by representatives of community leaders from Brohol Village who stated that their village was visited quite often by officials from the Batu Bara district including visits by the Regent. This is because in their village there is a livestock business that is superior so that officials often visit their village.

Next is the Talawi Sub-District Head, Mulyadi, who said that they often hold coordination meetings with community leaders, religious leaders and youth leaders during the pandemic. A budget has also been made to prepare PPE for health workers. In principle, during the pandemic "people are not hungry and not sick" so maximum efforts must be made to protect the interests of the community while still preventing the spread of diseases caused by the Covid-19 virus. Mulyadi also stated that there are still many people who until now do not believe that the covid-19 virus does exist even though various ways including going around the village using loudspeakers have been done to make them aware that the dangers of this pandemic are real and there have been many victims who have fallen. The public even today still believes a variety of bad information (hoax information) that is widely circulated on social media.

Then a mother from the Health Department stated that they had a special website for the covid task force. Radio is also used for the dissemination of covid-19 information but the effectiveness of radio use is still in doubt. Later, information was added that there is still a small part of the people listening to radio broadcasts, especially fishing communities. The Health Office also came down directly to disseminate information to the community, including for the implementation of the covid vaccine. Currently, phase I vaccines have reached almost 78%, while phase II vaccines have reached more than 40%.

A community leader from Sei Suka Subdistrict named Heru stated that the community is currently aware of the benefits of vaccines, even around 75% of people in their area have been vaccinated. Previously, people were also persuaded in various ways to be willing to be vaccinated, for example by providing basic necessities for people who were willing to be vaccinated.

Next, Sahala Nainggolan as Assistant II of the Batu Bara Regency Government. He stated that he himself often descended on society during the pandemic. According to him, the transmission of covid-19 in Batu Bara had increased in the July-August 2021 period because it was the peak period of the spread of

the second wave of the pandemic in Indonesia. He also stated that although currently public awareness is good, it must still be given continuous education so that this pandemic can really end. The Pamong Praja Police Unit, the Transportation Service, the Indonesian National Police and Army as well as the Health Service must also continue to routinely carry out raids on the implementation of health protocols so that the pandemic is over. The approach used must vary depending on the culture of the local community based on local wisdom.

Another representative came from a father who was in the stall business. He stated that his business almost collapsed due to restrictions on operating hours during the PPKM period. Not to mention the time restrictions for visitors who eat on the spot, while the business is on Jalan Lintas Sumatera which is certainly visited by many motorists who want to eat while resting for a while unwinding.

Satpol PP often comes to visit to provide advice on the implementation of business activities during the PPKM period. Fortunately, at this time, the situation is better so that they can return to their activities better. He also proposed that officials in the ranks of the Batu Bara district government, including the Regent, should shop more often for small entrepreneurs so that the lives of entrepreneurs can be helped and raise their brands in the community.

Representatives from the Batu Bara Industry and Trade Service stated that they had done many things during the pandemic, including in the form of providing business cart assistance, small and medium (MSME) training, distributing masks, spraying disinfectants, providing tax relief stimulus for 3 months, desk assistance for MSMEs, capital assistance and all kinds of efforts that have been made to save the business of MSME traders.

The Regent said that for areas far from the district., covid information was conveyed through religious leaders and community leaders in the village. Religious leaders and community leaders are considered an extension of the district government in conveying information related to covid-19, especially vaccines, which are currently pursuing the target towards 100%.

Each of the religious leaders and community leaders was given a motorcycle with a red plate, their sign representing the Batu Bara regency government to socialize information related to Covid-19. This is done because it sees a fairly high level of public trust in religious leaders and community leaders. The regent also said that it was not possible for him to go directly to the villages that were quite numerous and far away in location, but he usually visited because he saw the urgency and there were times when he sent representatives from the Batu Bara District Government to represent him. So anyone who is sent to the village is considered the presence of the Regent in the area.

At the end of his explanation, the Regent did not forget to express his appreciation for all OPDs, covid task forces, transportation agencies, MSMEs and the community who have worked hand in hand to carry out all the policies implemented by the Batu Bara Regency Government so that finally the Coal Regency Government is able to become one of the best regencies in handling Covid-19 which received an award from the Governor of North Sumatera.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Public Communication of the Batu Bara District Government in handling Covid-19

The area of Batu Bara district is 904.96 km² with a population of 410,678 people and the majority are Muslims and ethnic Malays, of course, have their own challenges in making public communication policies related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Public communication is aimed at a clear target audience, and in large numbers. The purpose, to provide illumination, entertain, or persuade. Public communication also allows for a dialogue between the speaker and the audience. The advantages include that the speaker can counter hoaxes. Public

communication is closely related to public relations. For this reason, when conducting public communication, public relations must know some public relations techniques such as writing press releases and understanding crisis communication. Public relations should also supplement public communication with corroborating documents such as media kits, media releases, and fact sheets. Even so, most importantly, of course, public relations understands the core of the problem, the background, the programs/policies to be communicated, and their benefits to the public.

4.2. TRIANGULATION RESULTS

The eligated informants consisted of Professor Humaizi, professor of Communication Sciences USU and Dr. Iskandar Zulkarnain, the central administrator of the Association for Higher Education in Communication Sciences (ASPIKOM). Both of them are Communication Science experts from the University of Sumatera Utara who have extensive and deep knowledge about the issues from the research results obtained.

Table :Triangulation Informant Answers

No.	Problems and research results Answers	Answers	
		Prof. Humaizi	Dr. Iskandar Z
1	The regent's public communication in handling Covid-19 that combines personal and impersonal factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It needs a mix of personal (direct) and impersonal (billboard, social media) communication. - Social media and outdoor media are only suitable for amplifying the message of the regent's figure and his device. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public communication of regional heads must pay attention to local cultural factors -It is necessary to research the habit of using social media and lower-line media such as billboards so that public communication in dealing with Covid-19 is successful.
2.	A public communication strategy that empowers local leaders and facilitates red plate motorcycles	Utilizing Malay religious and cultural figures in Batu Bara is appropriate and with malay language / cultural symbols	The conventional face-to-face approach needs to involve local leaders given the vastness of the territory
3.	Local government radio channels, other conventional mass media, websites and social media that have not yet become the choice of the Batu Bara community in the Covid-19 information agenda	Batu Bara government needs to improve the position of official and unofficial media outlets	Create radio content that is in accordance with the Malay culture. Website design must be made attractive according to the era of digital communication.

The FGD speakers argued that in implementing public communication that is suitable for the Batu Bara community, including handling Covid-19, it is necessary to pay attention to the cultural context and social values (Dijkzeul & Moke, 2005). Public communication will be much more effective when it involves opinion leaders. Although it seems one-way, but it must still prioritize honesty, public communication also needs to be planned properly (Sulistiyowati & Hasanah, 2021).

Public communication carried out by the Batu Bara Government involving local government radio and website media turned out to be not optimal. Such as the lack of socialization of online media and social media of the Batu Bara agency government related to covid-19 so that people access information directly from the center instead of from local media. The use of the Batu Bara district government radio as a medium of information to the community is also felt to be less effective. As triangulation informants Professor Humaizi and Dr. Iskandar Zulkarnain argue, there is not a single medium suitable for all public communication purposes, except for its characteristics in accordance with the culture and customs of the Batu Bara people (interview results May 25, 2022)

This is of course a meaningful input for the Batu Bara government to improve its performance, especially related to the use of website and social media and outdoor media (billboards and banners) which are widely used by the people of Batu Bara district. On the other hand, public communication has involved the Sub-District Head, Lurah, religious leaders and community leaders as opinion leaders and has hit the target so that the vaccine program that is being intensified in the Batu Bara district government can be well received by the community. This can be seen from the enthusiasm of the community following the vaccine program.

There are as many as 78% of people who follow the phase I vaccine program, while phase II vaccines have reached more than 40%. And this continues to be echoed to the public for immediate vaccines.

5. CONCLUSION

1. Public communication involving the heads of sub-district offices, sub-district heads, religious leaders and community leaders is right on target so that the vaccine program intensified in Batu Bara can be accepted by the community. This can be seen from the enthusiasm of the community following the vaccine program. However, the presence of the regent, whom they call "our father" is very important and cannot be replaced with digital media, billboards and mass media.
2. The challenge faced by the Batu Bara District Government in handling the Covid-19 pandemic is the vast area of the Batu Bara District. The District Government has the role of opinion leaders such as religious leaders and community leaders whose opinions are still heard by the community. The government facilitated their red plate motorcycles as a symbol of representation of the district government.
3. Face-to-face public communication channels carried out by sub-districts and village heads/ village heads are of interest to the community in delivering overcoming Covid-19. Meanwhile, public communication channels through local government radio and the internet (website) managed by the Government are less attractive to the public.

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