



Volume 3	Issue 2	November (2024)	DOI: 10.47540/ijcs.v3i2.1617	Page: 124 – 131
----------	---------	-----------------	------------------------------	-----------------

Regional Government Public Relations Communication Model in Handling Hoax Information during the Pandemic

Ruliawan Putra¹, Sutiya Fachruddin¹

¹Department of Communication, Universitas Halu Oleo, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: Sutiya Fachruddin; Email: sutiyanafachruddin_fisip@uho.ac.id

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Hoax, Media, Public Relations, Regional Government.

Received : 25 August 2024

Revised : 26 November 2024

Accepted : 30 November 2024

ABSTRACT

This research aims to describe the management of regional government public relations messages and communication media in handling information hoaxes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The widespread spread of COVID-19 pandemic hoax information has increasingly increased public panic and anxiety, especially in Kendari City. For this reason, the Kendari City Government, through the public relations department, has made various communication efforts to prevent the spread of hoax information. Research data was collected through interviews, observation, and documentation and analyzed using descriptive qualitative data analysis methods to provide a comprehensive picture of the object under study. Research informants were determined using purposive sampling. The results of the research show that the communication model implemented by Kendari City Government Public Relations in preventing COVID-19 pandemic hoaxes is carried out using a participatory communication model using all available communication channels as information media that can be easily accessed by the public. First, by carrying out a thorough identification of the information and hoax news that is being spread. Second, utilizing all types of communication channels available, such as outreach with Regional Apparatus Organizations (OPD) and the community, billboards, collaboration with online news media, partner information service institutions (Kominform and the Pandemic task force), installing billboards and standing banners, and developing its official website.

INTRODUCTION

Information is created to increase knowledge from the previously unknown to know. The function of information normatively provides knowledge, educates, and ultimately aims to change attitudes for the better. But now, information is very difficult to sort out which is true and which is a hoax, sometimes the correct information is even in the public stamp that it is hoax information. The circulation of various information related to the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic contains facts and manipulated data causing differences in knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of the public in receiving the information (Stanley et al., 2020). The variety of COVID-19 information from the beginning of March 2020 until this study was conducted raised pro and con attitudes in the community.

Information disseminated through mass media, online, and also social media causes anxiety in the community which results in actions that can harm themselves and others, such as the exclusion of exposed people, self-health therapy errors, and excessive social prejudice. This situation tends to occur. The rate of spread of hoax information occurs because someone does not check back when sharing it with others and does not understand the impact of the information itself in the future. Hoax information that developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in Kendari City, was widely circulated through social media in the community such as the circulation of sanctions and threats in case of violations of health protocols, pay fines, and closure of community businesses to cause unrest. Therefore, the public relations of the Kendari City government took participatory steps in preventing the spread of hoax information in the community.

Public Relations is the art and social science of detecting trends, predicting consequences, and advising organizational leaders, as well as implementing planned programs of activities that serve both the interests of the organization and the public or general interests (León et al., 2022; López-García et al., 2021; Ruslan, 2003).

Based on the characteristics of Public Relations activities, according to international public relations experts, Cutlip Center, and Canfield (1982) define the function of Public Relations as follows; First, Supporting the main activities of management in achieving common goals (a function inherent in the management of the institution/organization). Second, Fostering harmonious relationships between agencies/organizations and the public who are the target audience. Third, Identify everything related to opinions, perceptions, and public responses to bodies/organizations that lie and vice versa. Fourth, Serve the wishes of the community and provide contributions to management leaders for mutual goals and benefits. Five, Create reciprocal two-way communication and regulate the flow of information, publications, and messages from agencies/organizations to the public or vice versa to achieve a positive image for both parties.

This research aims to describe the communication model carried out by the public relations of the Kendari City government in the prevention and countermeasures of hoax information in the community by utilizing various communication channels available. This research is expected to provide knowledge in the development of communication science, especially regarding public relations communication models in tackling hoax news related to pandemics. Furthermore, this research is expected to develop participatory measures for local governments in the dissemination of hoax information that disturbs the community with balanced and community-oriented policies in all aspects of their lives.

METHODS

This research was conducted in the community relations section of the Kendari City Government, Southeast Sulawesi, with research informants selected using a purposive sampling technique, namely selecting informants based on research needs or selecting informants deliberately. This

refers to (Spradley, 1997) who said that informants should be people who know exactly about the research object so that they obtain as much information as possible to answer the research problem. The informants in this research are the Head of the Public Relations Department and the Kendari City Public Relations Officer who plays an active role in handling the prevention of hoax information. The data analysis method uses qualitative descriptive analysis to provide a comprehensive picture of the research object. The type of data in this research uses qualitative data which is a source of a broad picture that contains an explanation of the processes that occur in data collection based on observation, interviews, literature, and documentation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Kendari City Government Public Relations conveyed directly to the public to always verify information if they receive information whose facts and sources are still in doubt. Communication is carried out by the Kendari City government with the OPD unit at every meeting and with the community. The government's public relations communication model in tackling the spread of hoaxes related to the COVID-19 pandemic issue is carried out through the development of official websites, social media accounts, and collaboration with mass media institutions (Hansson et al., 2021). This effort was made to prevent the spread of hoax information in society. Hoax is information that is engineered to cover up real information. In another sense, the hoax is news, information, fake news, or lies (Fernández-Torres et al., 2021). Hoax is information that is engineered to cover up real information. In other words, the definition of a hoax can also be interpreted as an attempt to distort facts by using information that seems convincing. Identified several hoax information circulating in the community, namely:

1. Lockdown Information

Information on area closures will be provided by the Kendari City Government starting April 1 2020 until an unspecified time limit. This information circulated widely on various social media and caused panic among the public, here is a picture of the circular:



Figure 1. Lockdown information hoax

Source: www.kominfo.go.id April 17, 2021

Figure 1 contains an announcement message that based on the contents of the OPD chiefs meeting led by Mayor Kendari via teleconference then starting on Wednesday, April 1, 2020, Kendari City will conduct a lockdown. During the period of the isolation of the territory, the community is prohibited from entering or exiting Kendari City unless it is permissible; (1) Ambulance vehicles or health workers carrying patients, (2) Vehicles carrying food staples, and (3) Government agency officers.

The message appears accurate by listing the time, date, and competent sources so that it is easy to believe. The spread of this information caused a community uproar. Nevertheless, public relations of the Kendari City government through part protocol and leadership, Fadlil Suparman explained in the interview that the information is a hoax by distorting facts. Here's an excerpt from the interview: "Indeed, there is hoax information about it, namely about the Lockdown starting on April 1, 2020, the Mayor never lowered the circular or information about the Lockdown on April 1, 2020, when there was indeed an order to carry out Lockdown or isolation of the territory but it was implemented on April 11 and there was a warrant or direct appeal from the Mayor" (April 13, 2021).

2. Hoax swab test for students who will do face-to-face lessons in 2021.

Face-to-face learning discourse is also affected by hoax information about the need for swab tests for students who will do face-to-face learning. Hoax information circulating as seen in the following image:



Figure 2. Hoax Mandatory Swab Test before entering school

Source: www.kominfo.go.id April 17, 2021

Figure 2 above shows hoax information in the form of news from one of the online news media on Friday, December 18, 2020, with the news title Official Face-to-Face Learning January 2021, Children Must Swab Test Before School with a photo view of the Minister of Education and Culture Nadiem Makarim with the caption OFFICIAL Face-to-Face Learning January 2021, Children are required to test before school. Starting in January 2021, the school plans to be able to do face-to-face learning. This was conveyed by the Minister of Education and Culture Nadiem Makarim some time ago. This news is also quite disturbing to the community. The obligation of the swab test for students makes the public worried about the results of the swab test. Government public relations through part protocol and communication leadership, Fadhil Suparman explained that the public is worried about swab tests because, for the community amid the Covid-19 virus outbreak, in addition, the information makes parents/guardians of students depressed because of the high cost of swab tests. The Kendari City Government confirmed that there was no warrant from the central government regarding the information to apply to face-to-face learning in schools.

3. Lippo Supermarket Red Zone Self-Service Hoax

Lippo Supermarket hoax information which is the largest shopping center in Kendari City becomes a red zone, here is the display of the message:



Figure 3. Hoax Message What's App Swalayan Lippo Red Zone

Sumber : www.kominfo.go.id

Figure 3 is a message that contains a sentence. "I conveyed to friends for a while not to go to Lippo Kendari first already red zone, 14 people exposed in Lippo". This information is widespread in the community through social media platforms. However, after being traced it turned out to be just a hoax issue that has spread to make the community rowdy and worried.

The three messages above are only a small part of the hoax information circulating in the community that causes uproar and panic. For this reason, the Kendari City government through the public relations division conducted various communication efforts to prevent and combat the circulation of COVID-19 hoax information in the community. Handling done by local governments takes time to identify information spread on social media (Arailym et al., 2023; Salaudeen et al., 2022; Upe et al., 2021). Communication carried out by the government is just prevention so that information is not disseminated continuously after confirmation of the truth. Here is a communication model carried out by Kendari City public relations in handling the COVID-19 hoax:

1. Socialization with OPD and society.

Socialization is very important in the process of countering hoax information either on social media or hoax news that is spread directly in the community, in this way it can instill good values/norms in social media users that the information is not necessarily flat in the sense that all there is also information that contains Sara issues and hates speech. Activities like this can be held on various occasions such as in breakfast together, on the sidelines of official meetings, in telephone talks, or in a seminar.

The City Government and also every OPD must socialize regarding the spread of hoax news. This is as stated by Helda's: "In the city of Kendari, the

news is very easy to spread, for that the Mayor always reminds the relevant service (OPD) to continue to aggressively socialize about hoax news, in every socialization or activity of the Mayor also continues to remind not to easily trust information that is not clear its origin, the public is expected to only trust news coming from the government and related agencies" (interview April 13, 2020)

Kendari City Government through the mayor always reminds the public to continue to be vigilant and keep themselves from spreading information that is not yet clear the truth, including information related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the attitude of the public not to panic in receiving information before verified the truth of the facts.

Socialization of hoax news is intensively carried out, especially in the pandemic period, where information about COVID-19 is very important to provide knowledge to the public about the dangers of receiving and trusting COVID-19 hoax information. In addition, the public is also educated on how to distinguish true information and hoaxes. This is as stated by Helviana Adetya's "So far, both we from the public relations division of the Kendari City government, the Covid task force, and the Ministry of Communication and Information are aggressively doing what is called socialization both through social media and down directly to the field of course by still complying with health protocols. Our efforts certainly aim to reduce the number of the spread of hoax news pandemic Covid-19 so that the public can know the truth of the information spread, for that also we ask that the public also sort out in advance which news is true and news that is not true. (Interview April 16, 2020)

The planned nature of public relations contains the understanding that public relations work is continuous work, has methods integrated with other parts, and the results are real. This planned and continuous requirement is one of the most rated in the highest competition of international PR programs, namely the Golden World Award For Excellence in PR (GWA).

2. Includes disinformation watermarks and HOAXES.

Watermarking as in message images is very effective in preventing hoax information from being spread continuously. The design of this watermark is very clear to be seen and read by the public because it is very easy to understand. The hoax

word label with a bright red color with a blue Kominfo logo is a message that can be understood by the public in developing its official website.

Communication by the public relations of the Kendari City government through social media by providing information about the rule of law that applies due to spreading hoax information. The public can access messages related to any information through the website kendarikota.go.id as an official portal of the Kendari City government or by downloading the kendarikota.go.id application directly from the Play Store. This portal is also directly connected to the official portal kominfo.go.id information services on the application and the website can be a reliable source of information related to important events or official policies issued by the Kendari City government.

The role of public relations practitioners, in this case, is the process of solving problems as part of the management team. This is intended to help the leadership of the organization either as an adviser (adviser) to take execution actions (decisions) in addressing problems or crises that are being faced nationally and professionally. Usually by involving various departments and expertise in a special team to help organizations, companies, and products that are facing or addressing certain crisis problems cooperation with local online media.

Public relations media is any form of media used by public relations practitioners in their work with the purpose of wide publication so that public relations products or services are marketed more by the public. Kendari City Public Relations always conveys and reminds the public to be able to sort and distinguish the information they receive through social media. Public relations communication in the handling of hoaxes through online mass media such as always conveying the efforts that have been made by the city government such as issuing official policies in the form of mayoral circulars. Here is information spread through online news sites related to efforts to handle hoaxes.



Figure 4. News posts on online news media
Source: <https://detiksultra.com/> access April 19, 2021

Figure 4 shows the news with the title Kendari city government 'Tangkis' issue Hoax Lockdown. The government issued an official circular related to the enactment of the lockdown. This news is the government's response to the Lockdown issue on April 1, 2020, which spread on social media of the Kendari city community. Hoax lockdown information causes public uproar. Many people are flocking to buy basic materials, medicines, and vitamins in excess of supplies during the lockdown period, causing a scarcity of goods. The news can prevent the spread of information more widely and explained in the following interview:

"Cooperation between the city government and online and print media in Kendari City is quite helpful in suppressing the spread of hoax information in Kendari City although there is no written agreement between the City government and the online media, the Kendari City Government has confirmed dozens of official online media that received information directly from the Kendari city government. This is a mutually beneficial cooperation relationship with each other, namely, the city government can be helped by online media that disseminates information passed on from the ministry of information, task force Covid 19, and Kendari city government and benefits for social media itself they can get concrete information from agencies and agencies related to the problem of covid19 countermeasures and hoax news countermeasures" (Interview April 16, 2021).

This explains that online news media helps in the dissemination of true and confirmed information from accurate news sources although no written agreement is made by individual agencies. This is to show the objectivity of the news media in carrying

out its professionalism in reporting information. Kendari City Government itself confirmed dozens of online news media that cooperate in the dissemination of information and countermeasures of hoax news, namely; detiksultra.com, kendaripos.com, zonasultra.com, lenterasultra.com, amanahsultra.com, sultranews.co.id, kendariinfo.co.id, detik.com, kompas.com, rakyatsultra.com, koransultra.com, sultrakini.com, reisultra.com, and *Harian Rakyat Sultra*.

3. Information partners with the COVID-19 task force.

This cooperation is done to facilitate the city government to prevent and deal with the spread of hoax information. Mrs. Agus Rante as a staff of information system analysis of the public relations division of the Kendari City government always cooperates with the COVID-19 task force, related agencies, and also the media in Kendari City. Here's an excerpt from the interview: "For the analysis unit itself, we coordinate with the Kendari City Kominfo office to verify and validate the truth of news spread around Kendari City, the public relations division of the Kendari City Government always tries to coordinate with the Covid 19 Task Force and the Kendari City Kominfo office regarding the news of the Covid 19 pandemic" (Interview April 12, 2021).

The interview showed that handling and preventing the spread of hoax information requires cooperation with institutions or institutions that are competent to the information needed by the community, especially information related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The function of cooperation between institutions or agencies is a mandatory duty in controlling all information and news spread in Kendari City.

Practically on the ground, the three main elements of PR can function optimally if a company realizes the importance of cooperation, the interaction of interrelationships and interrelationships (interrelationships with each other) between employees and superiors and companies with the public which finally the determining point of the existence of companies or institutions during society in building good relationships. While in the cooperation itself, there are several needs, namely: (1) mutual symbiosis, (2) mutual support, (3) mutual appreciation.

Good relationships are created to avoid conflict or conflict of interest (conflict of interest).

Communication is an important medium for creating good relationships. The cooperation carried out is an obligation to the duties of each service, as stated by the head of the protocol and communication sub-section of the leadership that: "So far there is no special cooperation or arguably no written cooperation between relevant agencies but this is a cooperation of obligations or duties that have been given by superiors, the Kendari City government itself confirmed several online media in collaboration with task force Covid 19 and Kendari city government, but although the information disseminated by online media that has been confirmed comes from the Kendari City government or Related agencies, the Kendari city government together with the ministry of communication and information also continue to monitor the online media, this is a form of anticipation of the Kendari city government and the information service against the spread of hoax news" (Interview April 13, 2021).

The above interview explained that this form of cooperation is the duty and obligation of the relevant institutions to always monitor information disseminated through online media to record related institutions as valid and trustworthy sources of information for the public.

4. Media Banner

Prevention of the spread of information and hoax news with the installation of standing banners and Billboards in strategic places that are easy to pay attention to by the general public:



Figure 8. Billboard installation contains The Mayor's Circular Letter

Source: www.kotakendari.go.id

Installation of billboards containing the circular letter of the mayor of Kendari so that the public gets the right information. This is done every

time there is a mayor's circular issued to prevent the occurrence of inaccurate information on the source. Strategic installation in crowded places of active citizens, such as markets, terminals, and schools, and every service or OPD. Various forms of efforts made by public relations of the Kendari city government show a participatory and continuous communication model by using all available channels and establishing cooperation with various institutions and communities. Public Relations is a free translation of public relations. The word public has a homogeneous meaning and is more specific. The word Public Relations itself can be interpreted as a group of people who have the same interests, concerns, and interests towards a particular object, institution, organization, or institution (Gassing & Suryanto, 2016).

Furthermore, according to (Ruslan, 2003), public relations is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting consequences, advising organizational leaders, and implementing planned programs on activities that serve, both the interests of the organization and the public or public interests. The main duties of public relations in the field of communication, (Gassing & Suryanto, 2016) are explained:

1. Analyze and evaluate the tendencies of public behavior. Public behavior can reflect the good or bad of the organization in providing services. Therefore, public behavior should always be monitored and taken seriously. The results of observations that have been analyzed and evaluated are then recommended to management. Public relations recommendations related to communication become one of the foundations for the organization or company in formulating policies.
2. Bringing together interests. The interests of the organization do not rule out the possibility of different from the public interest or vice versa. The task of public relations is to be able to bring together various organizational and public interests to create mutual understanding and respect. When interests are different, then public relations can carry out their duties to connect and bring these interests together.
3. Evaluating organizational programs is related to the public interest. This task illustrates that the position and authority of public relations practitioners are quite broad. After the work

program is implemented by the organization, public relations practitioners must respond and immediately conduct an evaluation. The results of the evaluation will be the material for organizational considerations related to policy, especially those concerning the public interest.

CONCLUSIONS

The role of public relations practitioners in this case is the problem-solving process carried out by the management team. This is intended to help organizational leaders, both as advisors, to take execution actions (decisions) in overcoming problems or crises that are being faced nationally and professionally. The planned nature of public relations implies that public relations work is continuous work, has methods that are integrated with other parts and the results are real. Usually by involving various departments and expertise in special teams to help organizations, companies, and products that face or collaborate with local online media to overcome communication problems carried out by Kendari City government public relations in preventing the spread of hoax information in a participatory manner by using all existing communication channels as an information medium that is easily accessible to the public. First, by carrying out a thorough identification of the information and hoax news that is being spread. Second, utilizing all types of communication channels available, such as outreach with OPD and the public, watermark labels, collaboration with online news media, partner information service institutions (Kominform and the COVID-19 task force), installing billboards and standing banners, as well as development. Official government website as a source of accurate and reliable information. It is hoped that the public will be more careful in receiving and disseminating information whose source is unclear so that the hoax phenomenon, especially during a pandemic or in situations involving people's lives, can be immediately addressed by the city government and related agencies. It is hoped that the city government and information services can work more quickly and intensively to prevent the spread of hoax news. The variety of COVID-19 information from the beginning of March 2020 until this research was carried out has given rise to pros and cons in society. This research still has limitations in terms

of the type of hoax information and forms of reporting in mass media, both online and print.

REFERENCES

- Arailym, N., Esenzhol, A., Raushangul, K., Katira, K., & Botakoz, N. (2023). Pandemic, Hoaxes and Information Security of Kazakhstan. *Journal of Information Policy*, 13 140–158.
- Fernández-Torres, M.J. Almansa-Martínez, A., Chamizo-Sánchez, R. (2021). Infodemic and Fake News in Spain during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health*, 18, 1781.
- Gassing & Suryanto. (2016). *Public Relations*. Andi Publisher.
- Hansson, S., Orru, K., Torpan, S., Bäck, A., Kazemekaityte, A., Meyer, S. F., ... Pigrée, A. (2021). COVID-19 information disorder: six types of harmful information during the pandemic in Europe. *Journal of Risk Research*, 24(3–4), 380–393.
- León B, Martínez-Costa M-P, Salaverría R, López-Goñi I. (2022). Health and science-related disinformation on COVID-19: A content analysis of hoaxes identified by fact-checkers in Spain. *PLoS ONE*, 17(4): e0265995.
- López-García, X.; Costa-Sánchez, C.; Vizoso, Á. (2021). Journalistic Fact-Checking of Information in Pandemic: Stakeholders, Hoaxes, and Strategies to Fight Disinformation during the COVID-19 Crisis in Spain. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health*, 18, 1227.
- Ruslan, R. (2003). *Metode Penelitian PR dan Komunikasi*. Raja Grafindo.
- Salaudeen, K. A., Ajetunmobi, U. O., & Ojebode, A. (2022). Covid-19 Containment Communication in Nigeria: Do Kari-Kasa Community Still Believe ‘the Media are of the Devil’?. *International Journal of Qualitative Research*, 2(2), 104-117.
- Spradley, J. (1997). *Metode Etnografi Terjemahan* oleh Misbah Yulfa Elisabeth. Tiara Wacana Yogya.
- Stanley, M. L., Barr, N., Peters, K., & Seli, P. (2020). Analytic-thinking predicts hoax beliefs and helping behaviors in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Thinking & Reasoning*, 27(3), 464–477.
- Upe, A.; Ibrahim, Z.; Arsyad, M.; Sumandiyar, A.; Jabar, A. (2021). Strengthening of social capital through penta helix model in handling Covid-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Pharmaceutical Research*, 13(01), 4243-4248.