

Power, Transparency, and Social Impact in Leadership Communication: Critical Analysis of BULOG During COVID-19 (2020–2023)

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic created a global crisis that tested the leadership capacity of governments and institutions, particularly state-owned enterprises (SOEs) tasked with public service delivery. In Indonesia, Perum BULOG—a state-owned logistics enterprise—was assigned a critical role in stabilizing food supply and ensuring national food security during the crisis. This study offers a critical analysis of BULOG’s leadership communication practices during the pandemic period from 2020 to 2023, focusing on the dynamics of power, transparency, and social impact. Drawing from the critical paradigm, this research applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the narratives, rhetoric, and communicative strategies found in BULOG’s official statements, public reports, and crisis responses. The study explores how leadership discourse was constructed to manage public expectations, maintain institutional legitimacy, and navigate complex power relations amidst social and political pressure. Key findings highlight the performative function of crisis communication in shaping public perception, negotiating authority, and reinforcing the strategic positioning of SOEs during national emergencies. Furthermore, the study reveals that transparency in communication—when integrated with coherent messaging and responsiveness—serves not only as a governance tool but also as a catalyst for building social trust. This analysis contributes to the growing discourse on crisis leadership in the public sector, offering insights into how communication serves as both a site of power negotiation and a mechanism for social resilience. The case of BULOG underscores the vital role of communication in bridging institutional mandates with public expectations during periods of systemic disruption.

Keywords: communication leadership, communication crisis, BULOG, COVID-19 Pandemic, paradigm critical

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Introduction

In 2020 the world experienced tremendous shock, with namely emergence COVID-19 disease or also known as the Corona virus. The presence of the virus quick become global and immediate pandemic impact wide to health system, economy, and also resilience food all over on earth. The term COVID-19 itself is abbreviation from Corona Virus Disease, while number 19 behind it is marker that the virus discovered in 2019. Speed the spread of the Corona virus is forcing The World Health Organization (WHO) has designated COVID-19 as a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. Since that's it the COVID-19 pandemic triggered multidimensional crisis, both in the health and economic sectors and social, including food sector that is highly dependent on stability chain supply and state intervention.

In Indonesia, the spread of COVID-19 is also spreading very quickly. Countries with population large reaching 270 million soul that (statement from the Central Statistics Agency – BPS at the end of 2020) directly face various very complex and extraordinary challenges normal in his efforts handle pandemic President Joko Widodo on March 2, 2020, confirmed case the first case of COVID-19 in Indonesia. Since that moment, Indonesia experienced wave widespread spread of COVID-19 in counting days. Complexity and panic mass mark various existing obstacles, including limitations health tools, policy restrictions changing social conditions, and the impact expanding economy.

In the context of resilience food, the COVID-19 pandemic provides challenge that have not been happen previously for leadership organizations in various sectors, especially in state-owned enterprises, which have role strategic balance between continuity operational, public service obligations, and trust. The government quick assigning Perum BULOG, as a state-owned company that plays a role for guard stabilization food national during crisis.

Logistics company the state's property is also directly face to face with a myriad complex challenges during pandemic to ensure availability food and prices material food tree in the middle global turmoil. Task is not easy for Perum BULOG, even though own network chain supplies solid food distributed throughout Indonesia. Perum BULOG management is also aware of the existence of factor accompanying politics the COVID-19 pandemic, namely, the potential emergence changes leadership statehood that can just leads to chaos, as consequence failure carry out task give eat the people.

As usual happen in the history of political Indonesian statehood. The hungry stomachs of the people in some parts area will quick expanding to regions other with fast. Developing become hunger national and ongoing with emergence street crime consequence hunger. However, the crisis caused by COVID-19 also shows inequality power in taking decisions, conflicts interest between bureaucracy with the interests of the people, as well as how communication problem appear, in particular communication crisis and leadership made into tool legitimacy or even avoidance accountability. In this situation pandemic implementation communication crisis demand transparency, fast response, and communication effective leadership for maintain public trust and policy crisis effectiveness.

Literature Review

According to Berger & Meng (2014), “PR leaders act as sense makers by interpreting complex environments, influencing collective understanding, and negotiating organizational legitimacy with internal and external stakeholders” (Berger & Meng, 2014).

A scientific study thinking that shapes base research and methods used in look for answer from the phenomenon being studied. Paradigm in study social and humanities according to Guba and Lincoln (1994) in book they “Competing Paradigm in Qualitative Research” share to in four main categories.

First, Positivism, which focuses for looking the objective and causality, with the methods are survey, experiment, and statistics. Second, interpretivism, for understand the meaning of social and experience individual. The method is studies case, with in-depth interview, and ethnographic. Third, is critical, namely analyze structure power, ideology, and social inequality. The methodology is critical discourse analysis, with ethnographic critical. Fourth, postmodernism which focuses mainly dissect narrative subjectivity, and deconstruction of social reality. The method in the form of analysis narrative and semiotics. In this research, critical paradigm in communication analysis will focuses on how relation of power, domination, and communication crisis structure in social influence.

In the context of Perum BULOG, the critical paradigm helps this study of the government and elite economy use communication as tool to control public narrative and decision-making regarding policy of food during pandemic. The theory framework owns a fundamental role, not just complement in research, but rather as runway or “scientific compass” to determine direction and guidance study in a way as a whole, including validity, credibility, and contribution from this study, and explain the phenomenon being studied, analyzing, interpreting data, and connecting study with previous studies to drawing up conclusions and implications research.

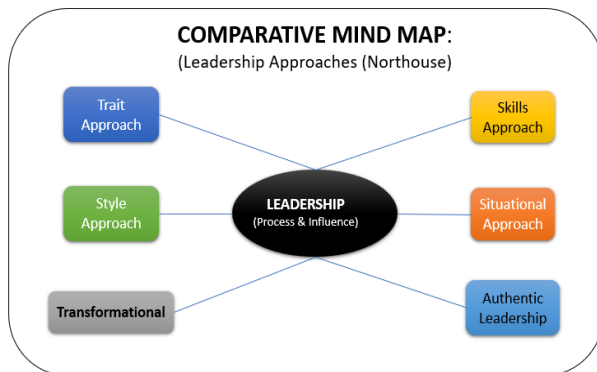
Paradigms and theories each other related in form method man understand and analyze phenomenon. Paradigm give framework underlying thinking selection and development theory, while theory offer more explanation and understanding in-depth about research phenomenon. The relationship of this important elements builds systematic and integrated knowledge in sector study, as for the framework expected of how theories can become scientific compass as following:

1. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2015); Analyzing communication strategies in respond crisis. Organization reputation become valuable resources (Winkleman, 1999). Crisis and unexpected events can bother operational organization system, as well as threaten internal damage organization reputation. Communicative response in organization within crisis organization can functioning limit as well as repair something like reputation damage. In the organization, we new start discuss method use response communicative to protect reputation. From the experts, they recommend a very accommodating strategy that features request apology on crisis (e.g., Benoit, 1995; Sellnow et al.,1998). However, from universal application of a highly accommodating strategy This problematic happened because responsible answer to law as well as the financial impact generate.
2. The study applies several theories to analyze leadership communication during crises. Leadership Communication Theory encompasses three major forms of leadership: Transformative, Adaptive, and Authentic. Transformative leadership reflects the foundational aspects of transformation and innovation, particularly evident in crisis situations. Adaptive leadership captures the management and communication dimensions of crisis handling and organizational change. Meanwhile, Authentic leadership emphasizes integrity, trust, and organizational culture, although there remains some uncertainty about which leadership type is most suitable for describing the current context.

Transparency Theory (Rawlins, 2008) explains how transparency in communication influences public trust. Power Theory (Foucault, 1980) examines how leadership discourse reproduces and sustains power relations. Social Impact Theory (Habermas, 1984) explores how communication and policy decisions shape societal outcomes, particularly affecting vulnerable groups.

Figure 1

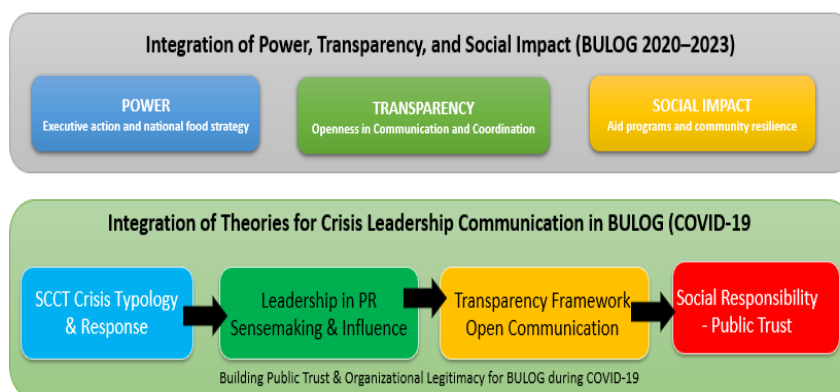
Comparative Mind Map



A leader's attitude reflects how one thinks and feels about others, which is demonstrated through various behaviors. This attitude can influence others and, when positive, can be highly beneficial. A positive attitude has the potential to shape the feelings of those around the leader. For example, when a leader shows enthusiasm and support for the implementation of a new workplace strategy, team members are likely to feel more optimistic and receptive to the new idea.

Figure 2

Flow of Integration of Power and Integration of Crisis Leadership



Methodology

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach to examine how transparency is applied in leadership within the context of Bulog's communication practices. The qualitative method is useful for providing a systematic and credible description of phenomena related to transparency, communication, and leadership.

The study adopts a case study design that explores in depth the community engagement and communication techniques utilized by Bulog's Jakarta office to maintain public trust. Primary

and secondary data collection methods are applied. For primary data, structured observations are conducted to identify and interpret behaviors directly relevant to the research problem and objectives. Purposive sampling is used to select key informants, while snowball sampling helps expand the respondent network to include other relevant sources.

Systematic data collection and analysis aim to characterize Bulog's community communication strategies. The primary sources in this study include statements from Bulog officials, interviews, and public remarks made by Budi Waseso, as the organization's leader.

Results

Analysis of BULOG's crisis communication identified key actors: CEO Budi Waseso (appointed 2018, former high-ranking police officer) and the crisis team, who framed food logistics challenges as security imperatives requiring firm governance. Empirical findings from discourse analysis show three operational dimensions of PR leadership: (1) direct participation in policy formulation meetings, evidenced by integrated communication strategies in official releases; (2) ethical oversight role, seen in transparent reporting of supply chain disruptions while prioritizing public food security; (3) bridging function, connecting external pandemic realities (supply shortages, public panic) with internal logistics capabilities to create unified crisis narratives across press conferences and social media.

Figure 3

News About COVID-19 in VOA



Discussion

These dimensions align with Berger and Meng (2014), where PR leaders interpret complex environments and negotiate legitimacy with stakeholders. Budi Waseso's security background shaped a directive discourse protecting reputation as a core asset, consistent with Coombs (2015) SCCT emphasizing reputation defense in high-responsibility crises. The ethical "conscience" role extends Rawlins (2008) Transparency Theory by linking disclosure not just to trust but to moral alignment in public sector crises. Foucault's (1980) power discourse framework reveals how BULOG's communication reproduced hierarchical authority while sustaining public compliance through shared crisis meanings. Collectively, findings illustrate PR evolution from tactical support to strategic influencers in Indonesian state-owned enterprises during existential threats.

Summary and Conclusion

This study critically examined Perum BULOG's leadership communication practices during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2023, employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to evaluate policy effectiveness in maintaining national food security. Key findings highlight CEO Budi Waseso and the crisis communication team as discursive agents who constructed narratives of food resilience, framing supply chain disruptions as manageable security imperatives rather than systemic failures. Their strategies reinforced public trust through transparent reporting and coordinated messaging across ministries, while negotiating social legitimacy amid public panic and economic pressures.

PR leadership manifested in three core dimensions: active participation in strategic decision-making beyond technical roles, serving as the organization's ethical "conscience" by aligning responses with public interest, and bridging external pandemic realities with internal logistics capabilities to foster collective understanding. Budi Waseso's background as a former high-ranking police officer informed a firm, authoritative discourse that protected institutional reputation and sustained operational continuity, demonstrating communication's pivotal role in state-owned enterprises (BUMN) during multidimensional crises.

Implications

Theoretically, these findings extend Berger and Meng (2014) sensemaking framework to Indonesian BUMN contexts, where PR leaders interpret crises not just technically but as power-laden negotiations with stakeholders for legitimacy. Budi Waseso's security-oriented leadership exemplifies how practitioner backgrounds shape policy discourse, aligning with Coombs (2015) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by prioritizing reputation as a vital asset in high-responsibility scenarios. This integration of Rawlins (2008) Transparency Theory reveals how disclosure builds trust when coupled with ethical accountability, offering fresh insights for crisis communication curricula in communication studies programs.

Practically, the study informs public sector leadership training, emphasizing adaptive discourse that balances authority with participation to enhance resilience in future disruptions. For thesis supervision, it models critical paradigms for analyzing government communication, bridging Foucault's (1980) power relations with empirical BUMN cases to guide students in exploring social impacts of policy narratives. Overall, implications underscore communication's evolution from tactical tool to strategic instrument for political legitimacy and societal stability in emerging economies.

Limitations

Methodologically, reliance on secondary data such as official statements, press releases, and public reports constrained access to internal deliberations, potentially overlooking unpublicized conflicts or alternative stakeholder perspectives. While CDA provided depth in discourse analysis, the absence of primary interviews or real-time observations limited triangulation, introducing risks of interpretive bias despite rigorous coding protocols.

Scope limitations include the single-case focus on BULOG, which restricts generalizability to other BUMN sectors like energy or transportation, or non-pandemic crises such as natural disasters. The study's timeframe ending in 2023 excludes longitudinal post-crisis effects, such

as sustained trust metrics or policy adaptations under new leadership, while qualitative emphasis precluded quantitative validation of transparency's causal impact on public perception.

Recommendations

For Perum BULOG and similar BUMN, implement real-time transparency dashboards tracking food stocks, supply chains, and decision rationales, complemented by participatory forums for citizen input to democratize policy processes and preempt trust erosion. Train communication leaders in hybrid sensemaking models integrating SCCT with local high-context cultural norms, fostering ethical discourse that combines authority with accommodative apologies during crises.

Academically, future research should adopt mixed-methods approaches, incorporating stakeholder interviews and surveys across multiple BUMN for comparative analysis, quantitatively testing transparency's long-term effects on legitimacy via metrics like Net Promoter Scores. Expand critical paradigms to longitudinal studies post-2023, examining narrative shifts under evolving political landscapes to refine leadership communication theories for Indonesian public sector resilience.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

In preparing this manuscript, AI-assisted technologies were utilized to enhance the writing quality, clarity, and coherence. Specifically, OpenAI's language model (ChatGPT) was employed for drafting, revising, and proofreading the text. The AI was used to generate initial drafts of certain paragraphs, improve language fluency, and ensure grammatical accuracy. All AI-generated content was carefully reviewed and edited by the author to maintain academic integrity and ensure the accuracy and originality of the manuscript. The use of AI tools was limited to assisting with language refinement and did not influence the substantive content or interpretation of the research.

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