

GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS' PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

This research attempts to illustrate the perception of Public Relations (PR) profession in Indonesia. Adapting past research from Sterne in 2010 which research described media perception in New Zealand, this particular research explore the perceptions not from the media, but from government officials.

Information was extracted from representative of government officials since they represent the various types general public. In Indonesia, it is compulsory for every government office belonging to a department (headed by a state minister) to have a PR officer. Government officials with various backgrounds represent the variety of government department in Indonesia. The informants were carefully selected, choosing only individuals not directly involved or associated with any PR institutions and/or activities.

Several notions emerge that shape the embodiment of perception of PR profession in Indonesia, based from the government officials. The most dominant notion is gender stereotyping, where PR is considered as area of work suitable for female professionals. Other notion is the misconception of PR work as spin-doctors rather than actual PR with sets of rules and ethics. Previous two notions and other findings of government officials' perception are classified into three categories: relationship-related; job-description; and social status. Irony arises, where government offices' are obligated to have a PR officer by state-law, yet this study's findings indicated their lacking of knowledge for ideal/actual PR work.

The research propose further research based from a model developed from this research to allow a more thorough understanding to the general public's perception of PR Profession in Indonesia.

Keywords: Public Relations, Public Relations Practitioners, Public Perception, Communication Management, Indonesia

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Background

In Indonesia, it is compulsory for every government office belonging to a department (headed by a state minister) to have a Public Relations (PR) officer/division. There are several regulations introduced by the government that regulates the practice of Public Relations within the organizational structures of Government Institutions.

The first one is, *Undang-undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 14 tahun 2008 tentang Keterbukaan Informasi Publik* (Indonesian Law no. 14/2008 about public information disclosure); a government offices/institutions are not allowed to withheld information important for public consumptions. Sensitive information must be delivered using a 'single gate policy', where each government institutions must use a designated spokesperson or PR officer.

The second regulations is, *Peraturan Menteri Dalam Negeri no. 13 Tahun 2011 tentang Pedoman Pelaksanaan Tugas Kehumasan di lingkungan kementerian dalam negeri dan pemerintah daerah* (Minister of Interior regulations no. 13/2011 related to the guidelines for implementations of PR practices within the ministry and provincial/local government offices) and *Peraturan Menteri Negara Pendayagunaan Aparatur Negara dan Birokrasi Publik No. 30 Tahun 2011 tentang Pedoman Umum Tata Kelola Kehumasan di Lingkungan Instansi Pemerintah* (Minister of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform regulations no. 30/2011 related to the guidelines for implementations of PR practices within government institutions). The two regulates the definition and scope of PR, and explains about the functions and proper PR procedures for government institutions. Some of the more important issues that are discussed in the regulations are the definition of PR and scope of Government Public Relations (GPR).

According to the regulations, the Definition of PR; PR in a government institution (government PR/GPR), is an individual/organizational activity by a person and/or division of a government office, whom/which practices the management functions in the field of communications and information to the public, stakeholders of an office and vice versa.

Also found in the regulations, is the Scope of GPR; PR management, professional relations and coordination between government offices, media analysis, communication crisis management, dissemination and documentation of information, PR practice monitoring, PR practice evaluation

The laws in detailed, regulates how PR as a profession and/or management functions, should work strategically within each government offices management structure, to co-create important messages and manage communications with/to the public.

Yet, there was a very interesting statement delivered by Mr. Rudiantara (2015), Indonesian minister of communications and information technology related to the demand of professional PR within the government; "The Profession of Public Relations is not new to the public, but only few really understand about the importance of PR as a profession and on how PR works are done. Government Public Relations are also lacking in competence."

The statement reflects how the government sees the existing condition of GPR in Indonesia. The statement was delivered simultaneously with a massive recruiting effort from the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform to recruit 150 GPR officers nationwide, to be placed in strategic government offices as an effort to improve the quality of PR practice by government offices.

It is very critical to discover how would government officials perceive the profession of PR, as it would serve as foundation for better PR practice within the government in Indonesia.

Purpose and Method of Study

This research attempts to illustrate the government officials' perception of Public Relations (PR) profession in Indonesia. Adapting past research from Sterne (2008, 2010), which in 2008 attempts to describe the business perceptions of PR in New Zealand, and in 2010 described media perception in New Zealand. Different to Sterne's study, this research explores the perceptions from government officials; Information was extracted from representative of government officials with various backgrounds to represent the variety of government departments in Indonesia.

The informants were carefully selected, choosing only individuals not directly involved or associated with any PR division and/or activities (not belonging to any department which is responsible to do PR activities). 30 people belonging to the middle to top management in various government office were interviewed about how they see PR as a profession and what do they think about the relationship of PR with their organizations.

Originality/Value

This study should serve as bases for further study concerning the perceptions of Public Relations in Indonesia, as no such study has been completed in Indonesia, so this this study can also provide information for comparison of similar studies of perceptions of PR. This research also provides insight for PR practitioners in Indonesia on the role of PR within a government institution/office.

Research Limitations

Due to resource limitations, geographically, the research fails to accommodate every possible population in terms of provincial division, as the researcher only interviewed government officials from West Java, Special Capital District of Jakarta, and Banten Province. Careful considerations should be taken when generalizing the result of the study to generalize the entire population of government officials in Indonesia.

Past Research on PR Profession Studies

Sterne (2008, 2010) studied about Business and Media Perceptions of PR in New Zealand. In the 2008 research, the study showed that business CEOs had a low opinion of public relations practitioners. They tended to see PR as an integral part of doing business. They also saw reputation management as best conducted by themselves rather than a consultancy – except in a crisis. A clear distinction was made

between PR (consultancy based) and corporate communication (in-house). None of the companies used the term PR in their in-house communications titles. Communications managers distanced themselves from PR, claiming instead to offer integrity-based, transparent communication. Marketers saw PR as serving marketing. CFOs and Legal Counsel saw PR as serving strategic objectives but were skeptical about the competence of communications practitioners to deliver strategic communication.

In the 2010, media perceptions of public relations in New Zealand are largely (but not exclusively) negative. The relationship has four faces – sworn enemies; traditional rivals; close collaboration; and being in a different place (not connecting). Antagonism from media practitioners is largely based on experiences with public relations practitioners but also on self created identities. Variations are due to power differentials such as self and other definition, realities in the media landscape, and perceived misalignment of interests.

Damayanti and Perbawasari (2015) studied about how university students in Indonesia perceive the strategic role of PR. University students believe that (1) the strategic role of PR is related to how close the PR Officer to the decision maker. If a PR Officer is not close to the decision makers, one cannot influence strategic PR works. (2) PR science that are learned in higher education, is relevant to the current PR Practices. (3) PR Officers should have standardized PR competencies, computer literate, and foreign language is a plus.

Ali and Roy (2013) studied about the perceptions of Public Relations from Communications Scholars and PR Practitioners in Bangladesh. The study was conducted due to the widespread negative attitudes create misunderstanding about this profession, which ultimately degrade the status of this job. Ali and Roy's paper aims to deconstruct the negative perceptions of public relations through examining the views of communication scholars and public relations practitioners of Bangladesh. The most important finding in this study is that the majority of respondents agreed that PR is an ethical and honorable profession, which has enormous importance in society. The respondents think that it not only provides media relations, but also a managerial and spokesperson position that bridges the gap between the public and the ruling class.

Ferdiana (2010) studied how employees of Perum Perhutani in Kediri (a state-owned plantation company in Kediri, East Java) consider PR position and function within the company. The perceptions of government workers on PR practice within their organizations is generally good, where the respondents believed that PR practices are conducted well and provide a beneficial result to the institution. Internally PR practices help with information traffic, and externally help maintain the institutions image to the public. PR officers also serve as information gatekeeper, delivering important information to stakeholders.

The study from Amalia (2011), attempts to illustrate the perceptions of government employees in Banten province regarding code of ethics on PR practices. The study shows that PR staffs from Banten province are aware of the ethics and code of conduct of PR practices, but in reality, putting practice into practice is very difficult

due to circumstances in the province. For example, the media has a habit for paid publicity by GPR officers for a news expose in the media.

Sani (2011) studied the Optimization of GPR functions in Indonesia. Relevant to this particular study, the research from Sani (2011) was also prompted by the implementation of Minister of Interior regulations no. 13/2011 related to the guidelines for implementations of PR practices within the ministry and provincial/local government offices. The study takes on GPR staffs works within the ministry of interior in Indonesia at shows that GPR staffs acknowledged the Minister of Interior regulations no. 13/2011 related to the guidelines for implementations of PR practices within the ministry and provincial/local government offices, pushes GPR within the institution to step up the level of professionalism and as an effort to push public participations. The study also acknowledges four important notions that arises from the regulations' practices related to GPR activities which are; public information service, public affairs, media content analysis, and crisis management.

Findings

As explained in the previous part, this research explores the perceptions from government officials where information was extracted from representative of government officials with various backgrounds to represent the variety of government departments in Indonesia. Several department and government offices was randomly selected,

30 people belonging to the middle to top management in various government office were interviewed about how they see PR as a profession and what do they think about the relationship of PR with their organizations. Sampling method was not employed, as subjective approach in determining informants was required. This study decided to take informants that are willing to cooperate and be interviewed and has to fulfill certain criteria for the research purpose (Babbie, 2010). Since past research from Sani (2011), Damayanti & Perbawasari (2015), also Ali & Roy (2013) indicates that people with more knowledge on PR practices tend to know more about the ideal PR practices, this particular research decided to select informants choosing only individuals not directly involved or associated with any PR division and/or activities (not belonging to any department which is responsible to do PR activities). The number of informants was decided based on the limited amount of resources that could be allocated for the study, in terms of time and financial support.

Adapting Sterne's study about business perceptions of PR in New Zealand (2008), informants were interviewed with open-ended questions, probing with issues related to GPR practices within informants' offices/institutions. The interview also started with some openers to warm up with such as top of mind responses to terms like "advertising", "social responsibility", "marketing". Structured questions such as, "What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of PR?" were followed up by exploratory funnel questioning about social responsibility, the place of PR in the institution, and who has responsibility for such things as reputation management, crisis communication, image building, community relations and tracking on changes in stakeholder opinions. The research also explores about the general activities and job descriptions of GPR officers and what is their opinion on PR activities, related to their work.

For analyzing the data, this study utilized symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) to explore definitions and concepts with the goal of uncovering embedded sources of discourse creation (Griffin, 2000; Babbie, 2004; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

The research findings were categorized into three groups, (1) relationship-related, (2) job description, and (3) social status. The following are the explanations related to the research findings. Several responses that were similar in responding to a common theme are grouped into one defining statement, and the numbers in parentheses indicates the number of people that provided the statements.

Relationship-related

This category includes how government officials see GPR based on their relationship with GPR officers on their regular activities. Participants were asked on how would they identify their relationship with PR and how would their work should relate to PR activities. It is quite alarming to know that most of the responses are quite negative for this category as follows:

PR not involved with strategic meetings (2)

PR only inform news and policies, not involved with decision-making (3)

PR too nosy about office information (10)

PR is unimportant, only complementary function within office (9)

PR should not interfere with regular activities of the office (5)

PR should not be involved in strategic meetings and not involved with decision-making. Some informants believe that instead of working strategically within the management functions (Cutlip, Center, & Bloom, 2000), PR should not be involved in such activities.

“It is to my understanding that GPR work on informing the media and public should be based on our (top management) instructions.” Other informant also noted the same opinion: “PR officers should just do their work. I don’t think they need to take part in important meetings that is not related to their activities.”

These insights reflect a poor understanding on the strategic role of PR. Some of them didn’t believe that PR should take on the strategic role within an institution for their work. And relevant to the previously explained notions, some informants also thinks that PR shouldn’t know important information and tends to get ‘too nosy’ about office information.

“...I really don’t like it when (a) PR officer start asking around about critical information that is not related to PR works. It is none of his business. I don’t think that PR should know all information, right? ...They should only know what they should write in the releases to the media.”

“PR is only for handling media. If it is not regulated by the state, I think the position is only a waste of resource... my office doesn’t really need a PR. PR works can be handled collectively.”

What is most alarming is the notion that PR work is not important and should not interfere with office activities. The statement of PR work as unimportant is quite humoring as the importance of PR has already been acknowledged in a state law. In

terms of internal relationship aspect, PR works may sometimes interfere with regular office activities and relevant to previous notion, PR officers should also have a good understanding to internal issues (Cutlip, et al., 2000).

Job Description

This category explains the GPR job-description based on government officials point of view. Some of the informants already have a good understanding of regular PR works related with the media such as:

Write news releases (11)
Create promotional activities (13)
Liaison for media (7)

Most informants are very well informed about the relationship of PR with the media:

“...When we (our office/institution) have a new policy, it is PR’s responsibility to spread it to the media.” Others also noted: “If a reporter come to our office, we always send our PR guy to help them with inquiries and other activities.”

PR is also known to take responsibility in creating promotional activities:

“Our PR always do the promotion in the media and create events for awareness related to our office’s policy.”

Although there are also some responds on misconception of trivial works that are somehow stereotyped for PR works, which includes:

Take pictures during official events (7)
Accept guests (25)

The stereotype for PR officers to work as ‘official photographer’ during official events and ceremonies in Indonesia is quite common, as many businesses also do the same practice.

“...Yes we always have our PR officers taking pictures during ceremonies and seminars.”

PR officers are also the one to meet should an official guest come to visit a government office, especially for people with official purposes.

“When a guest is present, and he/she doesn’t know which specific department to visit, we always send the guest to the PR department.”

The most alarming findings about PR works are the informants’ responds related to crisis and/or critical situations in a government office. Most of the believe that PR works as ‘fire extinguishers’ that handles crisis if one should occur, and it is acceptable to spin facts or lie if necessary, and the most surprising finding is about PR as scapegoat. Should a government office made a mistake, PR should take the blame and become the shield to the office. The following is the recap:

Fire extinguisher; if crisis occurs handle at all cause (24)
Spin Doctors; spin facts, lie if necessary (15)
Scapegoat; if crisis occurs, GPR are to blame (8)

“It is PR’s responsibility to put out the fire. Handle the media, deal with the community, do some CSR to clean up the mess.” Other informants also stated: “...White lies is necessary, particularly during the time of crisis.” And similar to the statement, other informants also mentioned: “Facts can be bent to suit our need. It is PR job to do so.”

Regarding the role of PR as a shield when a crisis occurs, one informant uttered: “...Well, that’s why we have PR. The superiors can stay clean, while PR deals with the media to explain the mistake...”

This kind of ‘spin doctors’ stereotype of PR, still occurs today and even some PR people do practice the activity up to this date. It is not the actual PR work, where PR should work based on fact and delivering the appropriate information to the stakeholders (Cutlip, et al., 2000).

Social Status/Classification

The other findings are classification and social status of PR officers based on the responds the informants. The result can be summarized as follows:

Prefer Female (28)
Educated/skilled in communications (7)
Good personality (19)
Can be accepted by every stakeholders (9)

The latter three criteria are somewhat relevant to the ideal qualities needed for PR works (Cutlip, et al., 2000), while the former is a nationwide preference of PR officers. Business and also government offices prefer PR officers to be female, past research from Smith (2006) indicates that Australian GPR are predominantly female, with the number of 71%. Kurnia and Putra (2004) conducted a qualitative study of gender preference of PR professionals in Indonesia, observing in the area of Yogyakarta, Java. The research concluded that the service industry, prefer female PR officers, and more than one per third GPR officers in government institutions are female. The preference of PR female workers is within the technical areas, where institutions prefer female to be ‘the face’ of the office.

Conclusions

Irony arises, where government offices' are obligated to have a PR officer by state-law, yet this study's findings are quite concerning--it indicates the lacking of knowledge for ideal and/or actual PR work from government officials. The most concerning findings are related to fact of PR as spin-doctors, and also as scapegoat. Gender preferences should also be taken into account, as there is a dominant female preference for GPR officers.

The research propose further research based from the categorization developed from this research to allow a more thorough understanding to the general public's perception of PR Profession in Indonesia. A more measured attempt with larger sample to confirm the perceptions of government officials' perceptions on PR is proposed, as it will give a measurable depiction on the reality of PR practices in Indonesia. The question of why has also not been answered, why would the

perceptions of government officials' are quite low when it comes to knowledge and ideals related to PR practices. The government should utilize the research to carefully decide on future strategic policy related to PR practices in Indonesia.

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