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NAVIGATING PUBLIC RELATIONS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT CONFLICTS: A Study on The Entertainment Venue Closure in East Java

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Abstract

This study investigates the crucial function of the Public Relations (PR) Department of one of the Municipal administration offices in East Java in resolving issues between the administration and the public. The PR department is essential in overseeing the public perception by guaranteeing the clear and efficient distribution of information on government acts, policies, and initiatives. The study is on the PR department's dual role as both an expert prescriber and a communication facilitator to improve government-public relations and mediate conflicts. The study employed a qualitative research methodology, which involved conducting interviews to investigate the role of the PR department. The findings suggest that the department is responsible for creating and executing communication strategies for the Mayor's office. They serve as a mediator between government officials and the public. The department also promotes the resolution of problems by working for the interests of both the government and the public, creating transparency and trust. Ultimately, the PR Department of the Municipal administration office is crucial for improving communication and maintaining constructive relations between the government and the public. The study suggests that enhancing strategic communication planning and implementing transparency measures would be beneficial in reinforcing public trust and promoting active participation.

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A. INTRODUCTION

Conflicts are an inherent aspect of human interaction, and they often arise due to competing interests, values, or goals. In organizational contexts, including local governments, conflicts may emerge when decisions impact various stakeholders in different ways. According to Moore (2014), effective conflict resolution requires a deep understanding of the underlying issues, the stakeholders involved, and the potential solutions that can satisfy all parties. Public relations (PR) plays a crucial role in managing conflicts, particularly in how it communicates decisions and policies to the public. Government public relations departments, in particular, act as the liaison between government bodies and the public, ensuring that the interests of both are balanced in conflict situations (Wilcox et al., 2015).

Theories such as the Contingency of Accommodation Theory (Cancel et al., 1999) offer a framework for understanding how PR can navigate conflicts. This theory posits that organizations, including government entities, must balance advocacy for their own interests with accommodation of public concerns. In conflict situations, PR practitioners often act as mediators, facilitating communication between the conflicting parties and helping to prevent escalation. Jin, Pang, and Smith (2018) emphasize that PR strategies should be adaptable, particularly in complex conflicts where both the organization and its stakeholders may have strong, opposing views. Therefore, the role of government public relations in conflict resolution is not just to communicate policies but also to mediate and foster understanding between conflicting parties (Fisher et al., 2011).

In one of the cities in East Java, a significant conflict emerged in November 2022 when the local government decided to close an entertainment venue. The decision, which was part of a broader effort to enforce local regulations on public morality, sparked protests from various stakeholders, including business owners, local residents, and members of non-governmental organizations (DetikJatim, 2022). The closure was led by the Mayor, who argued that the venue violated local norms and regulations. Despite this, the decision was met with resistance, particularly from business owners who claimed they were not adequately informed or consulted about the closure.

The conflict escalated when local NGOs joined the protests, arguing that the government's decision was too harsh and that it failed to consider the economic impact on local businesses and workers. As the protests grew, the role of the city's public relations department became critical in managing the narrative and addressing public concerns. The PR team was tasked with communicating the government's rationale for the closure while also attempting to mediate between the government and the disgruntled stakeholders (Kompas, 2022). This case presents a valuable opportunity to explore the role of government public relations in local conflict resolution.

The objective of this research is to analyze the strategies used by the public relations department of the city government office in handling the conflict arising from the entertainment venue closure. Specifically, the study will explore how the PR team balanced advocacy for the government's policies with accommodation of public concerns, as well as how they facilitated negotiation and mediation between the conflicting parties. By examining this case, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of public relations in local government conflicts and to provide insights for improving PR practices in similar situations.

B. METHOD

In this research, a qualitative descriptive approach is applied to explore and understand the complexity of public relations strategies in conflict resolution within the case study of the entertainment venue closure in one of the cities in East Java. A qualitative descriptive approach is particularly suitable for this study as it allows for a rich, in-depth understanding of real-world experiences and actions, particularly in complex socio-political contexts. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is ideal for investigating subjective perspectives and capturing the nuances of social interactions. It enables researchers to delve deeply into the lived experiences of stakeholders, making it particularly useful in understanding the communication strategies employed by public relations departments during conflicts.

The primary data collection method utilized in this study is interviews. Interviews are appropriate for this research due to their ability to capture detailed

and nuanced information directly from key stakeholders. Yin (2018) argues that interviews are a fundamental tool for collecting data in case studies as they enable direct interaction with informants, allowing for the exploration of their experiences, insights, and motivations. This research involved two key informants: Key Informant 1 (KI1) was a Public Relations staff member of the Mayor's Office, and Key Informant 2 (KI2) was the Head of the Communication and Information Office of the City.

To analyze the data collected, this research employs a descriptive qualitative analytic technique, which allows the researcher to systematically interpret the qualitative data gathered from the interviews. After data collection and transcription, the validity and reliability of the findings were ensured through various tests, such as credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability), and confirmability (objectivity) (Sugiyono, 2014). The analysis was conducted following the Interactive Model approach developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2019), which involves continuous data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing to derive meaningful insights from the data. This method is particularly effective in ensuring that the analysis remains thorough and reflexive, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the conflict and the role of public relations in managing it.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In conflict resolution, public relations play a vital role in balancing communication between the government and the public. The PR team aimed to effectively communicate the government's decisions while addressing public concerns over the entertainment venue closures. This strategic approach not only conveyed the legal reasoning behind the policy but also provided a platform for public voices to be heard, facilitating a more transparent and inclusive conflict management process, as explained by KI1 below:

"As part of the public relations team, my role is to ensure that the communication strategy we develop effectively conveys the policy while alleviating public concerns. In this case, we faced significant challenges in balancing advocacy for government policy, which emphasizes the importance of order and norms, with accommodating the concerns of the public, who felt impacted by the policy. We made efforts to provide comprehensive

explanations to the public about the reasons behind the closure policy, including the legal aspects that underpinned the decision. In our communication strategy, we also created space for the public to voice their concerns so they would feel heard and acknowledged"

The role of public relations (PR) in conflict situations, particularly in government settings, is vital for maintaining both credibility and public trust. The interview data highlights the dual responsibility of PR professionals in balancing advocacy for government policies and accommodating public concerns, which is central to the Contingency Theory of Accommodation (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997). This theory underscores the need for flexibility in PR practices, where professionals must navigate between advocating for organizational goals and responding to public sentiments. In this case, the PR team strategically implemented communication that was both informative and participatory, reflecting a two-way communication model, though not fully symmetrical. However, even with these efforts, the challenge of ensuring transparency while managing public dissatisfaction remains a persistent issue in governmental PR (Coombs & Holladay, 2015). Furthermore, KI1 explained how they make sure that the public is well-informed as below:

"To ensure the public was well-informed about the government's decision, KI1 emphasized the use of a multi-channel communication strategy. The PR team utilized social media, press releases, and in-person meetings with key stakeholders to disseminate the message. Additionally, they created discussion spaces on social media platforms where the public could ask questions and receive direct responses. Recognizing the importance of clarity, they simplified the language used, ensuring that people from diverse backgrounds could easily understand the information. KI1 stressed that consistency and clarity in communication were essential to prevent misunderstandings that could exacerbate the situation."

The strategy described by KI1 highlights the importance of utilizing multiple communication channels in conflict management, a practice that is well-supported in public relations literature. According to Grunig and Hunt (1984), effective communication in crisis situations must be multi-faceted and inclusive to

reach various segments of the public. By incorporating both traditional and digital media, KI1's approach aligns with the principles of two-way communication, which fosters transparency and public engagement. This strategy not only strengthens the government's credibility but also helps maintain public trust during conflict (Coombs, 2018). Additionally, KI1 also explained their direct role in the conflict as below:

"The role of the Public Relations Department was crucial in managing the conflict that arose from the closure of entertainment venues. We acted as the liaison between the government and the public, ensuring that the information conveyed was not only clear but also addressed public concerns. We employed several approaches, including direct discussions with community groups involved, and worked to facilitate dialogue between the government and the community. Additionally, we provided education on the background of this policy through various communication channels, ranging from social media to face-to-face interactions."

The proactive role of public relations in this conflict scenario underscores the need for effective communication strategies to mediate between government authorities and the public. In this case, the Public Relations Department effectively applied a multi-channel approach, fostering dialogue and addressing concerns from various stakeholders. According to Jin et al. (2018), successful crisis communication necessitates transparency, consistency, and the ability to facilitate constructive engagement with the public. However, the challenges of ensuring accurate and comprehensive information flow, as outlined by Taylor (2019), remain a potential limitation in such conflict situations. The department's efforts to educate the public on policy background through different channels reflect the application of adaptive communication, an essential aspect of managing public sentiment during crises (Liu et al., 2020). Hence, they conducted several mediation and negotiation strategies as further explained by KI1 below:

"In the conflict surrounding the closure of entertainment venues, the Public Relations department played a significant role in facilitating mediation and negotiation between the government and conflicting parties, such as the venue owners, the public, and other relevant groups. We acted as a bridge, ensuring that communication flowed openly and constructively in both directions. Our task was not just to convey the government's

policies, but also to listen and document the aspirations and complaints of those affected. During the mediation process, we facilitated transparent dialogue where all parties could freely express their views, but in a structured and focused manner."

The role of public relations in mediation and negotiation, as described by KI1, aligns with established conflict resolution strategies in organizational communication. By acting as mediators, public relations practitioners serve as intermediaries to build trust and open channels for two-way communication, ensuring that both the government and affected stakeholders can engage constructively. Grunig and Hon (2012) emphasize that effective public relations should prioritize mutual understanding and facilitate engagement to achieve resolution. Furthermore, the inclusion of structured dialogue, as noted by KI1, demonstrates an adherence to the principles of symmetrical communication, a key factor in fostering long-term relationships between the government and the public (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). However, it is crucial to consider the potential limitations of mediation, particularly in highly charged conflicts, where complete resolution may not always be achievable through dialogue alone (Pang et al., 2020). Lastly, KI1 evaluated and suggested several improvement strategies that can be applied in the future below:

"My main recommendation for improving communication strategies in the future is to increase early engagement with various stakeholders before the policy is implemented. Moreover, it is essential to strengthen two-way communication by involving more interactive dialogue channels, such as open forums or public discussions that can be accessed by all sectors of society. We also need to consider a more personalized approach in reaching smaller communities or those that may not have easy access to mainstream media. This can be achieved by utilizing more local and direct communication methods, such as community leaders or influential figures in the area. Regular evaluations of communication strategies are also crucial, so we can respond more quickly if there are shortcomings in the information dissemination process."

The recommendations provided by KI1 reflect a comprehensive strategic approach to enhancing future communication practices, emphasizing early stakeholder engagement, personalized communication, and ongoing evaluation.

These strategies align with key principles in public relations theory, such as Grunig's excellence theory, which emphasizes proactive communication and feedback loops to maintain trust and cooperation between organizations and their publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The emphasis on two-way communication and personalized outreach, particularly using local channels like community leaders, aligns with contingency theory, which suggests that public relations strategies must be flexible and context-specific (Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999). Regular evaluation ensures that communication remains effective and adaptable, reinforcing the dynamic nature of public relations management in conflict resolution.

The Role of Public Relations Staff of The City's Communication and Information Office in The Conflict Resolution

Public relations plays a crucial role in navigating the delicate balance between governmental authority and public perception, particularly during conflict situations. The closure of entertainment venues in one of the cities in East Java presented a significant challenge for the Public Relations (PR) staff of the Communication and Information Office. Their role was to craft a communication strategy that not only advocated for the city's policies but also accommodated the concerns of an anxious public, as stated by KI2 below:

"The Department of Communication and Information plays a strategic role in designing and disseminating messages to ensure that the policy for closing entertainment venues is clearly and timely understood by the public. We recognize that effective communication is crucial in situations like this, especially considering the sensitivity of issues involving the interests of the broader community and the government. Therefore, we work closely with the Public Relations Department to formulate messages that balance government advocacy with accommodation for public concerns."

The role of the Department of Communication and Information in the case of entertainment venue closure aligns with the principles of contingency theory in public relations, which emphasizes the need for flexible, situation-based communication strategies (Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999). The department's collaboration with the PR team to ensure clarity and balance in messaging illustrates the practical application of this theory. The emphasis on balancing

government advocacy and public accommodation reflects the two-way symmetrical communication model, which fosters dialogue and mutual understanding between organizations and their publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This approach is particularly important in conflict situations where public sentiment is highly sensitive. Furthermore, KI2 added the relevancy of their practices with the theoretical base as below:

"In accordance with the principles of the Contingency Theory of Accommodation, we cannot always adopt a fully advocative or accommodative position. In this case, we strive to maintain a delicate balance between defending the closure policy—rooted in legal and moral principles—and listening, responding, and adjusting our communication to the public's concerns about the social and economic impacts of the policy. This process involves creating a clear narrative, while remaining open to public dialogue to reduce potential tensions. On one hand, we are firm in enforcing the government's decisions, but on the other, we are flexible in delivering messages so that the public feels heard and acknowledged."

The approach outlined by KI2 demonstrates a pragmatic application of the Contingency Theory of Accommodation in managing public relations during a conflict. The theory, as explained by Cangel et al. (1997), posits that organizations must navigate a continuum between advocacy and accommodation depending on situational factors. In this case, the need for balance between enforcing government policy and addressing public concerns reflects the adaptable nature of public relations strategies during conflicts. KI2's reference to the process of narrative creation and public dialogue aligns with modern crisis communication theories that emphasize the importance of transparency and two-way communication (Coombs, 2007). Moreover, this adaptive communication strategy reinforces the organization's credibility while mitigating public dissatisfaction, which is essential for maintaining long-term stakeholder trust (Grunig & Grunig, 2011). However, the office has also faced several challenges as outlined by KI2 below:

"The biggest challenge we faced in disseminating information about the closure of entertainment venues was the public's resistance to sudden changes that directly impacted the local economy. The closure involved various stakeholders—ranging from business

owners, workers, to loyal customers—who felt financially and socially affected. We had to manage negative reactions from these groups, especially since the policy touched on sensitive aspects such as livelihoods and freedom of entertainment. Additionally, another challenge was delivering a consistent and clear message amid rumors and misinformation, which could trigger confusion and unrest within the community."

The challenges faced by KI2 highlight the complexity of public communication in a crisis, particularly when policies directly impact the economy and social fabric. According to Coombs (2007), managing stakeholder reactions is a critical aspect of crisis communication, and the resistance to sudden changes is a common issue. KI2's account of financial and social impacts aligns with the broader understanding that crises affecting people's livelihoods tend to provoke stronger emotional responses (Heath, 2010). Additionally, the proliferation of misinformation, as referenced by KI2, is a significant challenge in maintaining public trust during conflicts. The rise of digital media has made it easier for false information to spread quickly, making it even more critical for public relations departments to ensure clarity and consistency in their messaging (McNair, 2017). Hence, KI2 proposed several suggestions to be implemented in the future below:

"We realized that to improve communication effectiveness in the future, we need to strengthen the use of digital platforms. The first step we will take is to expand the utilization of social media and community-based applications to disseminate information more quickly and comprehensively. We will also enhance collaboration with local media to ensure our message is spread widely and consistently."

KI2's proposal to leverage digital platforms for more effective communication reflects a growing trend in public relations, particularly in crisis management. The use of social media has been identified as a key tool for timely and widespread information dissemination, especially in crisis situations where rapid communication is essential (Wigley & Zhang, 2011). By emphasizing the need for a stronger digital presence, KI2 aligns with contemporary practices in strategic communication, which increasingly rely on interactive platforms to engage with a broader audience (Kent & Taylor, 2016). The suggestion to collaborate with local media also underscores the importance of multi-channel

communication, ensuring that messages reach diverse segments of the population and maintain consistency across platforms (Grunig & Dozier, 2002).

D. CONCLUSION

The findings from this study highlight the pivotal role of public relations in managing conflicts between local governments and the public, particularly in East Java's entertainment venue closure. Through a multi-channel communication strategy, the PR team successfully balanced advocacy for government policies and accommodating public concerns. However, challenges such as public resistance, misinformation, and the need for clearer narrative-building were evident. This study emphasizes the importance of flexible and adaptive communication, especially when managing sensitive issues that directly impact public welfare.

The research supports the Contingency Theory of Accommodation in public relations, showcasing its applicability in real-world conflict scenarios. By navigating the continuum between advocacy and accommodation, the PR team in the city effectively implemented a communication strategy that aligned with the dynamic nature of the theory. The findings suggest that the theory provides a robust framework for understanding how PR professionals can adjust their communication tactics based on situational factors, reinforcing the importance of adaptability in crisis communication.

Lastly, to enhance future conflict management strategies, it is recommended that local governments invest in early stakeholder engagement, ensuring that public concerns are addressed before implementing policies. Expanding the use of digital platforms, particularly social media, for real-time communication is essential to reach broader audiences and counter misinformation. Additionally, fostering stronger collaborations with local media and community leaders can facilitate clearer and more localized messaging. Regular evaluation of communication strategies will ensure continued relevance and effectiveness in maintaining public trust during conflicts.

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