

Protocol Journalism Practice in the Indonesia Presidential Palace during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The pandemic of covid-19 has changed the practice to gather news in the Presidential Palace. Access to cover news that was previously open must be limited to prevent transmission of the covid-19 virus. The need to obtain news from palace journalists was made easier because the dissemination of news was not actively carried out by them, but was fully assisted by Biro Press, Media, dan Informasi (BPMI). BPMI helps the journalist by distributing daily press releases via the WhatsApp group or broadcasting live the President activities on YouTube. The purpose of this research is to explore how media relations practice during the pandemic in the Indonesia Presidential Palace. The researcher surveyed 53 journalists from different media and conducted in depth interviewed with three journalists. The findings suggest that BPMI implements protocol journalism practice. The implications of protocol journalism are discussed.

Keywords: *Protocol Journalism, Media Relations, Information Subsidy, Presidential Palace*

INTRODUCTION

The existence of public relations (PR) is indispensable in the open flow of information. PR practitioners aim to create understanding by disseminating accurate information to stakeholders. Communication efforts cannot be done by PR alone. Thus, PR works side by side with the press.

PR can be considered success if the disseminated information can be translated into news and receive significant media attention (Alvin, 2020; Kim & Heo, 2018; Susanti & Rahmanto, 2018). It is believed that the press can reinforce the message PR wants to convey. However, there is no obligation for news organizations to use information from PR. News content, when it is used, generally underutilizes information from PR as journalists and media editors sift through what information is used and what is not.

The implementation of Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB), which later changed to the Enforcement of Community Activity Restrictions (PPKM) cause various restriction to occur. There is a new normal approach in terms of PR disseminating information and journalists in finding and creating news (Alvin, 2022a; Robin, 2021).

This research will focus specifically on the practice of media relations in the Indonesia Presidential Palace as a location that has high news value. Therefore, it is interesting to study, especially during a pandemic where there are restrictions on access for journalists to come cover the news. Before the pandemic, journalists from various media who already had unique ID cards were able to enter the presidential palace and conduct interviews. This means that pre-pandemic media relations practices should allow open access to media crews (MetroTV, 2020).

In order to bridge the need for journalists to find news, then Biro Pers, Media, dan Informasi (BPMI) as Public Relations at the Indonesia Presidential Palace took the initiative to

distribute information in two ways. First, a press release distributed via the WhatsApp group (Megawati, 2021). Second, live broadcast on the Presidential Secretariat YouTube for presidential activities (PikiranRakyat, 2020). Thus, indirectly BPMI becomes the only source to obtain information that can be processed into news.

In the concept of public relations, initiatives from BPMI towards journalists are referred to as media relations (Taylor, 2009). More specifically, the practice in place is known as information subsidy (Gandy, 1982). The information subsidy explains how media professionals and PR professionals can work together to create news. Put it simply, the media must create news, while PR practitioners are required to publish news through the media. Thus, PR practitioners providing information to the media in the hope that the organization they represent will become part of the news (Alvin, 2019, 2022c).

In a study by Kent (2011), the author emphasizes the limitations of traditional journalism strategies that involve journalists simply repeating messages provided by government or corporate spokespersons. The author argues that such an approach is ineffective in increasing HIV/AIDS literacy. Additionally, in countries like Ethiopia and India where multiple dialects are spoken, it is crucial to translate complicated health issues into coherent local language in order to effectively resonate with the people.

Meanwhile, Taylor (2009) explores the potential of public relations in contributing to democratization and civil society initiatives. While some scholars recognize the significant potential for public relations by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to raise awareness about important social issues in transitional nations, others criticize the practice of public relations in newly formed nations, perceiving it as a form of hegemony that prioritizes Western ideas, values, and standards. The author highlights the need for more scholarly attention to truly comprehend the evolving role of public relations in civil society. The research conducted by the author focuses on exploring how the relationship between public relations and the media contributes to civil society development in Kosovo. The study suggests that the concept of "protocol journalism" serves as a guiding metaphor to understand and critique the public relations–media relationship in Kosovo. The implications of protocol journalism for media development and the credibility of public relations in the context of Kosovo are discussed.

Both studies highlight the need for innovative approaches in public relations strategies and emphasize the importance of context-specific communication to effectively engage with the public. The studies stress the significance of understanding the evolving role of public relations in civil society and the potential impacts on media development and public relations credibility.

Based on the explanation above, the researcher aims to have an understanding about the impact of media relations practices during pandemic in the Indonesia Presidential Palace. In this regard, there are two primary questions in this study. Firstly, how helpful BPMI assistance to the journalist whose activities are limited during the pandemic at the Presidential Palace? And, secondly, what is the impact on journalists who are too dependent on BPMI as a source of information?

RESEARCH METHODS

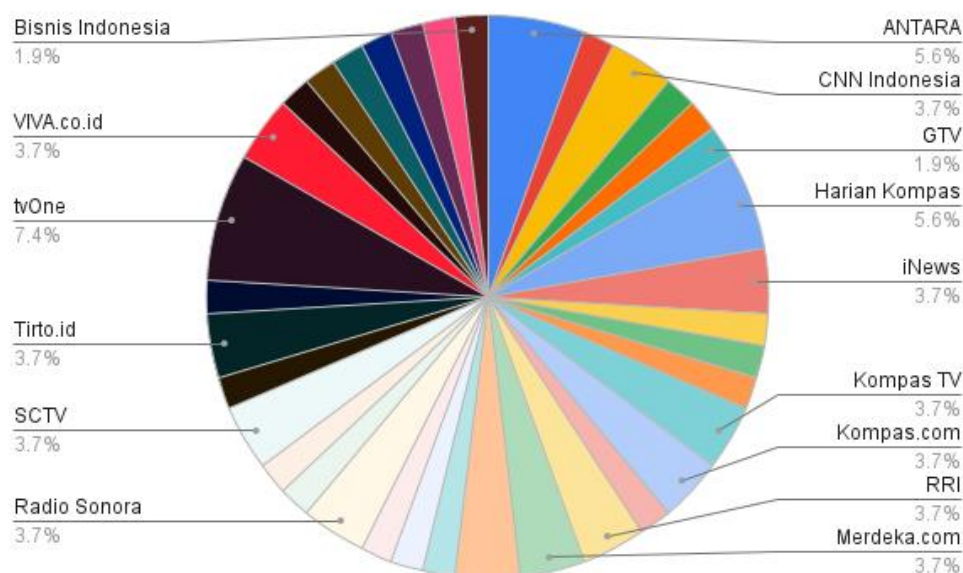
This research is categorized as a mixed method research. Firstly, the researcher conducted an in-depth interview. In qualitative research, interaction is allowed between the researcher and the data source who is the object of research. Moreover, this research also

follows the procedure of case study analysis according to Robert K. Yin (2018). Based on the selected case studies, the researcher categorizes this research as a single holistic case study.

Data was collected by conducting in-depth interviews with three informants who work as journalists in Indonesia Presidential Palace. Each of them comes from some different media representatives, be it online media, TV, or radio. The biodata of the informants in this study was not disclosed. According to Yin (2018), whenever the disclosure of biodata could bring risks to the informants' careers, then it needs not to be disclosed. The interview process takes 1 to 1,5 hours and data collection process was carried out during the PPKM period because of that interviews were still carried out online via zoom.

Further, to strengthen this research, 53 other journalists were also surveyed. The survey was made using a Google Form and distributed by means of snowballing due to the researcher' limitations in contacting journalists who were respondents.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristic



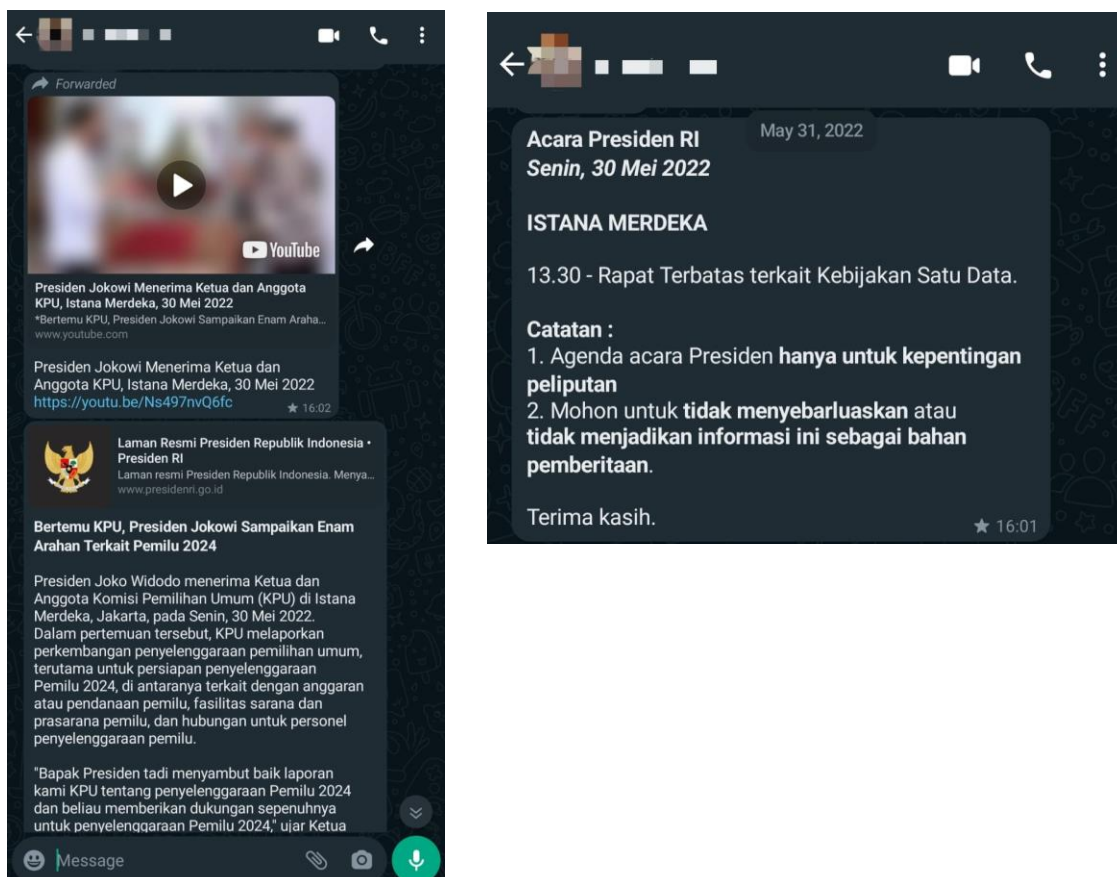
In order to obtain comprehensive data, the minimum criteria is to have two years or more of experience covering Indonesia Presidential Palace before the pandemic period. After the data is obtained, it will be processed for analysis. Researchers will also perform data reduction, then classify them into relevant themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

BPMI Initiative to help Journalist

BPMI has one main goal and that is to disseminate information on the activities of the President and the First Lady. During the pandemic, BPMI implemented pro-active PR approach by distributing the information that journalists need through WhatsApp group (Alvin, 2022b). The information is divided into two things, press releases or the daily agenda of the president's activities.

Image 1. Examples of Information Distributed by BPMI

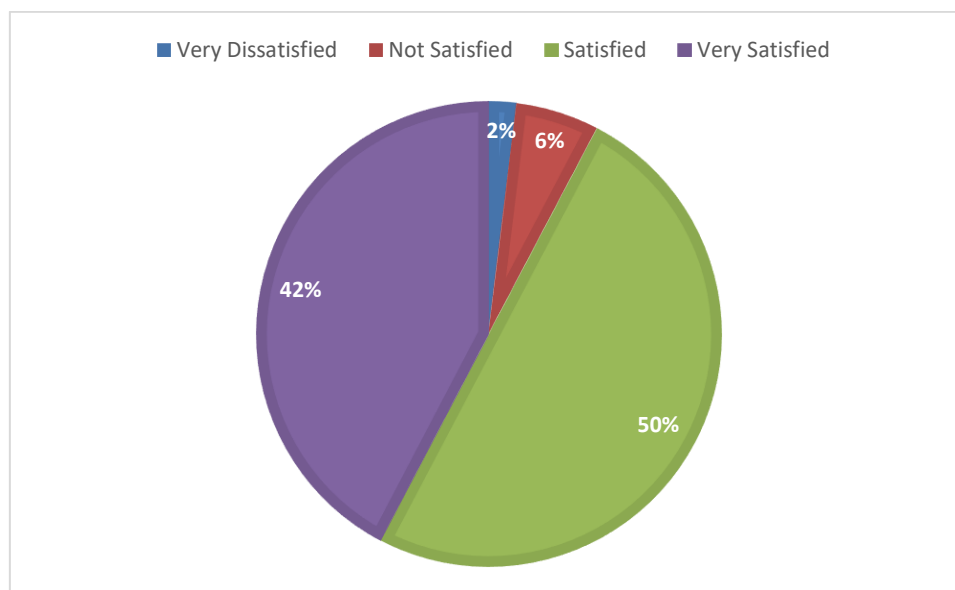


According to the surveyed data, it is shown that the majority of journalists (42% very satisfied and 50% satisfied) feel that BPMI has done their part by distributing information. The role of a BPMI as the primary spokesperson for a government or serves as the face of the government and or the president to the media. They are responsible for managing the government's public image and reputation. By providing accurate and timely information, they can shape public perception and maintain positive relationships with the press.

By taking the initiative to distribute press releases, the BPMI can ensure that the government's perspective and key talking points are included in media coverage. This helps in influencing public opinion and framing the discussion in a favorable manner. It also shows that the government is willing to share information with the public and the media, fostering trust and accountability.

Moreover, BPMI can also reduce the likelihood of misinformation or misinterpretation. This helps in maintaining consistency and ensuring that accurate information reaches the intended audience.

Table 2. Journalists Feel about BPMI's Initiativ



Based on the data, it can be seen that there are some who are still dissatisfied and even very dissatisfied. Regarding this issue, we asked one of our informant to find out the reason for the dissatisfaction.

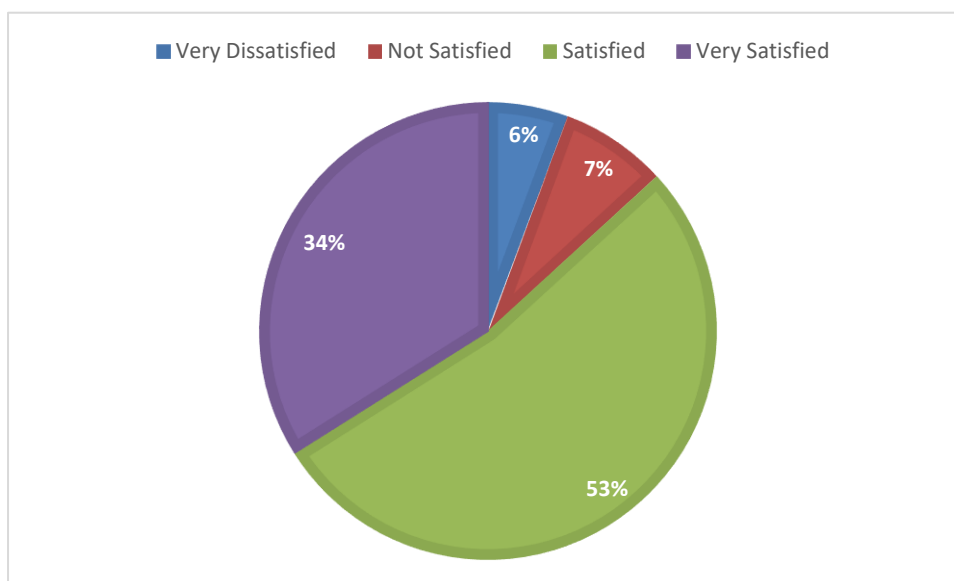
I feel that we cannot get complete information because we cannot interview the president or other government officials. Automatically only minimal information that we have. As journalists, we must ask for details because the public wants to know what detailed information is. If we cannot ask in detail, what is conveyed is only the outer shell. If it is not clear, later there will be negative things. Journalists must ask questions and provide the answers the public needs (radio journalist, 2022, in the interview)

Initiatives in disseminating information and helping journalists unknowingly have implications indirectly in creating an overdependence on BPMI. Journalists during a pandemic have used BPMI as the only source to obtain information as material for producing news. Furthermore, journalists also benefit from this situation because they can save more on transportation costs and time efficiency.

Proactive distribution of information by BPMI, it makes easier for journalists to access the latest news and updates. By providing timely press releases, journalists have ready-made content that they can use to develop stories and articles without having to spend significant time and effort in sourcing information.

On top of that, Timely distribution of information by BPMI enables journalists to meet tight deadlines. When journalists have access to necessary details in a timely manner, they can produce and publish their stories more efficiently, meeting the demands of today's fast-paced news cycle.

Table 3. Journalists Feel about Low News Production Cost



Based on the data above, most journalists feel that many costs can be cut in the effort to produce news. One of them is the traveling cost to the location of media coverage. During the pandemic, journalists become more passive and accept the situation of waiting for press releases. BPMI press releases are just a useful alternative source for producing news.

So we were helped (by the press release from BPMI). Moreover, the press bureau detailed who was present at the President's activity. We are not in the field; even though we are watching the live streaming, we do not know who is in attendance. If we do not get the press release, then we do not write any news, so we wait for it... (print/online media journalist, 2022, in the interview).

There are times (press releases) that are sent every day... However, once there was no press release, we automatically did not do anything (radio journalist, 2022, in the interview).

I think it is beneficial for the TV because visual is the most important thing. If there is an event on TV, the visual is prioritized. If it (the President's agenda) is open, this live streaming will benefit us (television journalist, 2022, in the interview).

Another interesting finding is that journalists also experience a work situation that doesn't stress them out. The demands of a journalist's work are very high because they have to go to the location of the coverage, waiting for events that have news value to occur, interviewing sources, and producing news. However, all of these stages do not need to be carried out because they only need to wait for the information from BPMI to be sent to them.

it is more stressful in the field, while working at home can be more relaxed. I can make two to three news in one hour. When asked if it is better, yes, it is much better to write news during the pandemic (print/online journalist, 2022, in the interview).

Looking at survey data and interview data, it can be concluded that journalists get the same information. Thus, there is potential for creating news with similar framing. bpmis initiative to help journalists and journalists' dependence on journalists turned out to give rise to a phenomenon known as protocol journalism. this will be elaborated in the sub-chapter below.

Protocol Journalism in Indonesia Presidential Palace

The lifeblood of PR is carrying out media relations activities (Butterick, 2014). The main principle of media relations is to assist journalists by supplying information that has news value so that it can be reported in various media. The concept of supplying information to the media is known as information subsidy (Gandy, 1982).

According to Park et al (2016), information subsidy is divided into two categories. First, it is proactive information subsidy when PR actively distributing their information to the press media. Second, it is reactive information subsidy when PR answering questions raised by journalists. Nowadays, it is rare to find news that doesn't have a PR role in it. Therefore, what BPMI does can be categorized as proactive information subsidy.

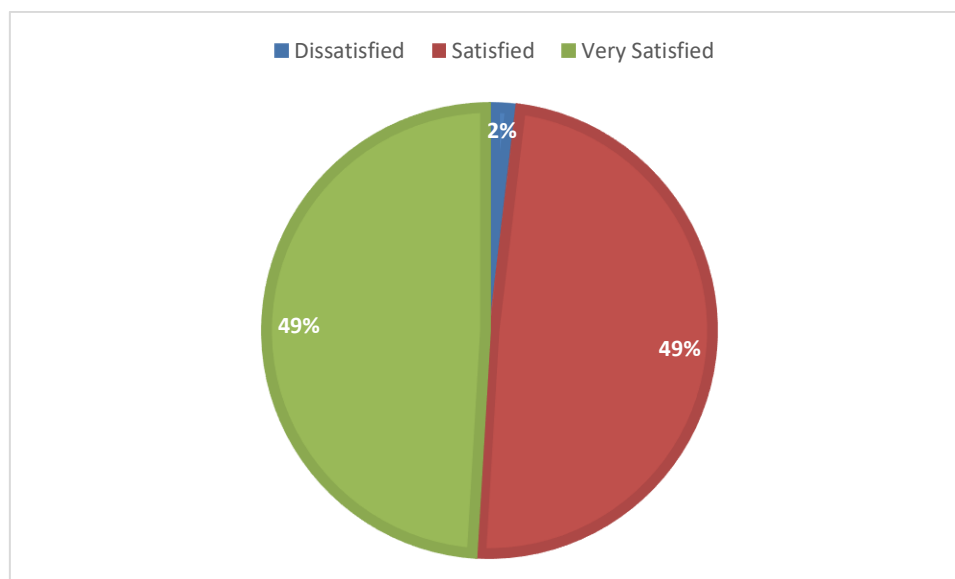
Moreover, almost 90 percent of news is a product of information subsidy practices (Chen et al., 2012; Lee & Basnyat, 2013). From a PR point of view, the practice of information subsidy is considered positive because it can reduce costs for media coverage. However, on the other hand, information subsidy practices that are too extreme can result in protocol journalism.

According to Taylor (2009), the phenomenon of protocol journalism was first sparked by research conducted by Professor Ralpf Akinfeleye who researched media relations in Nigeria. He defines protocol journalism as a type of journalist who makes news based on press release material or simply attends press conferences. This type of journalist does not fulfill his role as the fourth pillar of democracy or as a watchdog. Further, protocol journalists can be likened to mouthpieces for politicians or the government (Andresen, 2009). It can also be said that protocol journalism only allows manufactured information to be used by journalist.

Protocol journalism cannot be separated from the influence of the ubiquity of digital media. Communication technology nowadays ensure greater involvement of the media because it is virtually everywhere.

During the pandemic, the only source of information comes from BPMI. Consequently, journalists only rely on that information to make news. Most journalist understand the situation that the information contains government agenda setting and framing (Alvin, 2022a; Taylor, 2009).

Table 4. Journalists Feel about Government Agenda Setting and Framing



Even though journalists depend heavily on BPMI's information, they still try not to apply copy-paste. Most journalists still attempt to paraphrase and change the title of the press release. Furthermore, this situation has also made other government officials feel that information is only one-way, from BPMI to journalists. Before pandemic, journalists used to be able to interview officials in the Presidential Palace environment. Meanwhile, during a pandemic journalist were often ignored when calling for a sound-bite.

Before the pandemic, we can meet officials in person or made an appointment for an interview with the presidential spokesperson. During the pandemic is completely online, by WhatsApp or by phone. By phone is not effective in my opinion, because if we call officials without an appointment they will not pick it up. Meanwhile, if we contact them by WA, they only answer to someone close to them. In the end, it is all back to the proximity factor, how close you are as a journalist to the news source (print/online journalist, 2022, in the interview).

These findings are rather disappointing because PR and journalist should be working in a two-way street. Indonesia has rules regarding press freedom (Law No. 40 of 1999) and public information disclosure (Law No. 14 of 2008). Thus, by unconsciously practicing protocol journalism it will degrading the journalism itself.

Taylor (2009) has warned that protocol journalism will ruin the news gathering process. At the extreme level, the quality of news containing government narratives will reduce the quality of journalism in Indonesia. News can no longer be called news, but a product of advertisement. As a result, the public has the potential to disbelief what is reported by the media and the government.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the present research was to examine two things. Firstly, to understand journalists' perspective about how helpful BPMI during pandemic. Secondly, the implication that arise for helping journalists during pandemic.

In the communications industry, PR and journalists have their respective roles. Each of them should not dominate the other, but must synergize. PR needs the media to amplify information so that it reaches the target public, while journalists need a supply of information that can be used to make news.

During a pandemic, researchers suspected that the phenomenon of protocol journalism had unconsciously applied. The study has shown that most of the journalist rely heavily on BPMI's press releases and livestream broadcasting on YouTube.

The result of this study indicate that the flow of information on the president's activities is still well conveyed, but on the other hand this has become a bad habit for journalists and also the public. Journalists no longer play the role of watchdogs, but have become mouthpieces for the government.

Thus, journalists need to be given access to be able to carry out their duties, such as conducting in-person interviews. One of the researcher recommendations is to make a media day that can be accessed by a hybrid. It is absolutely necessary to form a symbiosis of mutualism between PR and journalists.

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