

## **PUBLIC COMPLIANCE: QUESTIONING CRISIS COMMUNICATION OF GOVERNMENT DURING COVID-19 PANDEMICS**

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### **Abstract**

The persistence of the COVID-19 crisis has charged uncertainty and anxiety in public since March 2020. The government provides one of the strategic issues to respond to this crisis which is theology ritual so-called praying. However, public mostly do not respond to it. The data obtained from two news articles regarding to government's reaction in dealing with COVID-19 taken from tempo.co and Hans-Georg Gadamer hermeneutic method is used to analyse the data. The findings of this study indicate the symbol of theology ritual is not the crisis communication that should not be taken by government. It implicates that if the logic of text is reciprocal with the context of public, it subsequently has potential to be more accepted that means constructing public compliance.

**Keywords:** *Anxiety; Logic of Text; Theology Ritual; Uncertainty*

## **Introduction**

Slim budget, uncertainty over vaccines availability and undisciplined crowds are considered to have resulted in Indonesia's recording a high COVID-19 death rate. However, some people have held on to a belief that it is more of a miscommunication factor; a lack in insight, coordination and strategy has been touted to be the factor. Ahmad Arif, the chairman of *Jurnalis Bencana dan Krisis* (The Association of Journalists on Disaster and Crisis) indicated that Indonesians panicked due to dreadful crisis communication maintained by the national administration (Gunadha and Tanjung, March 3rd, 2020). What is more, *Paguyuban Rakyat Indonesia Melawan Pandemi COVID-19* (The Association of the Indonesians against COVID-19 Pandemics) insisted that the top tier officials downplayed the apparent crisis, given that more medical staffs have fallen victims to the pandemics (Pandu, July 19th, 2020).

The data above presented vividly portray the incompetence of the national administration in handling the incoming crisis or risk of the COVID-19 outbreak. In all fairness, the constant high rate of death in later stages of the outbreak was due to the poor delivery.

Crisis communication, on social media including, has been extensively studied since it has been more accessible by the public recently, as opposed to the conventional ones (Utz, Schultz, and Glocka, 2012; Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar, 2011). The appearance of a certain name with authority in public, as showcased by the New Zealand Prime Minister is believed to be crucial in getting mass confidence over COVID-19 issues (McGuire, et al, 2020). Not really granted the share it deserves; the linguistic aspect of a certain message is worth paying attention.

COVID-19 crisis has tempted a great number of researchers to study its impacts. Prayoga (2020) suggested that the distribution of information in the forms of photos and videos has not effectively raised people's awareness of how serious the outbreak was, all leading to President Joko Widodo's preparedness being questioned. On the other hand, Eriyanto and Ali (2020) believed all stakeholders involved, from the national level to the local ones did not manage to create a dominative discourse (Lia, April 30th, 2020; Ihsanuddin, September 29th, 2020).

At this point in time, clear now it is that poor communication measures on the government's part has resulted in the citizens' taking the apparent crisis very lightly. To put it bluntly, those walking in the public service path have failed to do their task. To the best of the writer's knowledge, two previous studies have not really demonstrated linguistic department as an individual entity in viewing the world, one's world to be exact (Muhammad and Jefrizal, 2019; Nurhuda, 2015). Language is a reality, capable of affecting how the society perceive a statement (Munawir, 2014). Language usage, aside of decency department, has to ponder contextual aspects so as to banish possible deviation (Attamimi, 2012). In a nutshell, crisis communication and accurate delivery have to be aligned to evoke good perception.

Terawan Agus Putranto, the Minister of Health of Indonesia is the top provider of information concerning COVID-19. With authority and credibility at hand, he should have built a much better communication to help contain the outbreak. He, however, released relatively controversial standpoint; his statements were considered unfriendly and out of the context (Ihsanuddin, September 29, 2020). All things considered, his efforts have come to no avail.

The current study is of the view that crisis communication is not merely an information tool; rather, it is also a logical structure of texts and the context surrounding it. Inaccurate and improper delivery of a message can cause the people to doubt it, facilitating logics to come into play. Texts should be constructed in such a way that people can correctly chew the message intended. A failure to perform accordingly will not only degrade a public figure's competence but also other public servants as a whole. At the end of the day, people will no longer put any trust on their representatives.

## **Research Method**

The current study seeks to investigate the linguistic aspect of the texts delivered by the high-profile name during the pandemics period, with more focus being on the content. Content analysis is a method attempted to understand a certain text. Cho and Lee (2014) argued that the analysis is common among texts circulated in the media. The ultimate objective of

the analysis is to extract as many data as possible to later put them under certain categories, enabling us to detect all aspects behind the texts.

The writer decided to take two articles posted on an online platform, reporting the stance of Mr. Terawan on the crisis. The reports collected from tempo.co were released on February 11 and February 17 of 2020 with the titles “Virus Corona Belum Ditemukan di Indonesia, Menkes: Berkat Doa” (“Corona Virus Has Yet To be Detected In Indonesia, The Minister of Health: All Thanks To Our Prayers”) and “Tak Ada Kasus Virus Corona, Terawan: Mengandalkan Yang Maha Kuasa” (“No Case of Corona Virus Reported, Terawan: Never Count God Out”) respectively. The two articles were selected mainly because they contained Terawan’s optimistic belief in battling the outbreak with the power of submission to God. Terawans’ approach stood in total opposition to other countries relying on scientific measures (Dea, March 3rd, 2020). Roshali (2020) on the other hand, gave credit for tempo.co in their use of words, putting more weight in the writer taking it for further investigations.

In so doing, the writer relies on Georg Hans Gadamer’s hermeneutic approach. It allows us reveal the principles and competence of a language user (Regan, 2012). By and large, this model is famously known as Hermeneutic Circle, since it aims to study texts in circular way, deciphering them totally – including traditional background, personal standpoint and original concept. The approach being strongly associated with subjectivity, an investigator should refrain himself from being over subjective by seriously pondering the accessible facts (Darmaji, 2013).

## **Results and Discussion**

The appeal of Minister Terawan Agus Putranto to say a lot of prayers in early 2020 demonstrated a non-scientific approach. Furthermore, Terawan’s move – reflecting on the national administration as a whole – did not seem to take the issues seriously. The minister was convinced that it only took prayers to deal with the incoming virus, and nothing else.

## **Praying Campaign during the Pre-Covid-19 Period in Indonesia**

It was crystal clear from the start that Corona virus was something big, taking so many lives in the country where it first broke out, China. In an effort to contain the virus, China decided to adopt lock-down policy, a maneuver that soon was followed by Singapore and Malaysia (Saputra, March 17, 2020). Unfortunately though, Indonesia took a massively contrast approach, which in turn, threatened not only the archipelagic nation, but also its neighbors. Indonesia kept permitting international flights, allowing foreign passengers to enter.

Under the command of Terawan Agus Putranto, there seemed to be no clear prevention policy. He should have organized a complete data bank to let the whole country be aware of the catastrophic danger coming their way. Instead, he simply implored the people to uphold their immunity and stop being so scared of it. He even went further to confront the research released by Professor Marc Lipsitch from Harvard University, London, which was principally deemed to have insulted him and Indonesia (Sani, February 15, 2020).

The questionable stance did not escape the notice of Paguyuban Rakyat Indonesia Melawan Pandemi COVID-19 consisting of several non-governmental organizations and epidemiologists, including Lokataru Foundation, Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Jakarta (Jakarta Legal Aid Services and Centre for Indonesia's Strategic Development Initiatives (CISDI), Pandu Riono, Iqbal Elyazar, Panji Hadisoemarto, Ricky Gunawan, and Wawan Gunawan Abdul Hamid. They collectively believed that the crisis communication initiated by the government did not really enlighten the public. The unacceptable communication resulted in segregated, slow and contra productive responses (Nurita, 2020). Those in the association did think that the government has no competence in estimating how dangerous the virus is, forcing the latter to come up with false assurance of the current state. Furthermore, the association was of firm belief that the government should create a safe environment and adequate insights (Nurita, 2020a).

A conclusion to be drawn thus far is that the government is incapable of providing good communication over the on-going crisis, signalling that they do not take it seriously. Critical thinking and participation of the

public were limited. People were left stranded over the mitigation measures need taking. The study aims to describe the anti-critical approach practiced by Terawan Agus Putranto as can be found on 'tempo.co'.

Presented in Table 1 are Terawan's thoughts on the COVID-19 pandemics, putting a non-scientific approach before scientific one. He put so much faith in the power of praying as the better one than those who speak medical scientific approach as follow.

**Table 1.** Prayers are considered to be preventive measures to handle Covid-19 as said by Terawan Agus Putranto

Exemplary Descriptions	Themes/Codes
<p>Terawan Agus Putranto indicated that no report of COVID-19 case so far is due to the power of prayers, our prayers.</p> <p><i>"It is due to your prayers. Our prayers"</i></p>	<p>Relying on the power of praying</p>
<p>He believed the public should have been more grateful since Indonesia has encountered no case thus far</p> <p><i>"I just do not get it, we should be grateful that God is still with us."</i></p>	<p>Thanking God's blessing</p>
<p>Terawan Agus Putranto stated that there was not any mistake in praying so that Indonesia</p>	

Exemplary Descriptions	Themes/Codes
<p>was far away from COVID-19 case. The country needed just that.</p> <p><i>“What we achieved thus far was nothing but God’s grace. Why should we feel small counting on God?”</i></p>	<p>Counting on God’s mighty power</p>
<p>Terawan strongly believed that prayers have contributed to zero case.</p> <p><i>“Let them go on protesting. It is our right to put faith in God ”</i></p>	<p>Counting on God</p>
<p>We should be proud of our praying a lot.</p> <p><i>“We should obey the health protocols as laid out by WHO. Next is a prayer, never count on your own strength.”</i></p>	<p>Counting on the power of prayers, and not our own</p>

Source: Sani, February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020; Adyatama, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

The codings indicate that Terawan thinks so high of the power of prayers in containing the outbreak, being from a religious country. Saying a prayer is a common phenomenon in Indonesia which explains why God is always put first. To sum up, putting aside spiritual aspect is erroneous in handling the COVID-19 crisis.

In Indonesia's case, praying is the best option to deal with the outbreak. Other countries being busy finding vaccines, the government demanded that Indonesians be more decisive in counting on God for his blessing over zero case thus far. Terawan labored hard to convince the public to put faith in God (prior to the first case in March 2020). He was of the opinion that his country would be easily exposed to the virus without it. He certified that prayers should go hand in hand with health protocols outlined by WHO.

Terawan Agus Putranto pointed out that a prayer could contain the virus outbreak, and every person should pray every time they come into intimacy with God. A prayer did mitigate the impacts caused by the virus. It is then not much of an exaggeration to say that taking or saying a prayer is a logical construction of crisis communication built up by Mr. Terawan Agus Putranto.

### **Examining The Reality of Prayer: Crisis Communication Or Crisis of Communication?**

The narrative exercised by the Indonesian's Minister of Health, Mr. Terawan, to rely on God's blessing and the power of prayer demonstrates a propensity toward a light stance over the imminent danger caused by corona virus. Given the scientific approach taken by other nations, such a move really comes as a surprise. The excuse on Terawan's part is that Indonesia is a religious country, making that kind of approach simply understandable.

Sooner than later, the opted policy divides the country between those who support the idea and those opposing it, seeing that no solid evidence has proven it to be better than a scientific approach currently applied by South Korea and Vietnam through proper public delivery (Saputra, May 31st, 2020). The national stir centers on a crucial point: How effective or logical to pray in the time of crisis, is it Crisis Communication or Crisis of Communication?

Getting across some insights to the public during an esalating crisis is deemed of importance, explaining why saying a prayer appeal and being submissive to the will of God is beyond comprehension, even to those embracing pragmatism. Amidst the crisis, the government should be able



to describe the current situation through rational, interesting and holistic presentation (Nurhadi and Kurniawan, 2017).

Crisis communication is an endeavor to collect, process and disseminate information in handling a certain crisis (Silviani, Pardede, and Sembiring, 2020). Meanwhile, Ndela (2019) indicated that a crisis communication is of the goal to mitigate the impact aroused during a crisis to a much deeper perception. The two points noted above are sufficient to draw a conclusion that the society can come useful in containing a crisis, being enlightned. They would struggle a lot otherwise, pointing to the the government's failed crisis communication.

In Indonesia's case, it is the quality of the Miniter of Health that begs a big question. Crisis communication effort should be comprehensive and critical reasoning-based, not merely be based on dogma or imagination. Chrisman (2012) concluded that crisis communicators must be highly well-rounded and well-informed about the external environment to empower both the senders and receivers of the communication.

The success of crisis communication depends on the capacity of the sender. Being over confident or jumping into conclusion so fast, coupled with irrational thinking, will only result in more doubts by the public. Ardiyanti (2020) believed that the government did not do much to banish public fears in the early days of the pandemics, owing much to the government underestimating the crisis. An occasion where Terawan openly challenged the Harvard University concerning the existence of corona virus demonstrates that dysfunctional practice was there from Day 1.

Crisis communication dysfunction is a state where the message or the bearer of the message loses his sensitivity over the on-going crisis. A high degree of sensitivity results in constructive aspect of crisis communication (Geovannie, 2018; Eriend, Defhany, & Edlina, 2021). In conclusion, sensitivity brings more sense on the situation, enabling a communicator to properly deliver a message.

Good crisis communication will eventually lead to the society acknowledging the credibility of the government and making the former to be disciplined (Hasmawati, 2018; Fatubun, 2020). The well-informed society, at the end of it, will try their best to refrain from bad habits, possibly harming their safety.

Proper communication is a critical choice in building a social bond, something through which the top-tier officials can gain social trust over their capacity in handling the pandemics. The essential aspect of crisis communication is to awaken critical thinking of the people so they can mitigate the impacts of the outbreak on their own, and to do that a communicator has to be sensitive enough. The sensitivity will drive a person to be more perceptive over the others' well-being, basically in line with the second of the five principles of Indonesia: a just and civilized humanity. Proper narratives in the time of crisis are a symbol of a state man quality, the pinnacle of humanity. In other words, humanity has to be put before theology.

In Terawan's case, however, the idea of saying a prayer to withstand the outbreak is discernable; Indonesia is a religious country. Religion is never to sit a part from Indonesian life since joy and sorrow are two sides of a coin: the coin of religion (Prawiro, 2020).

To say the least, Terawan's appeal is not totally wrong; it is consistent with the nature of the Indonesian life: to stay faithful to God. However, the political arena is nothing but relational exploitation. Besides asking his people to stay true to God in such an arduous phase of life, Terawan promised to provide preventive measures, despite not being highly specific on the matter. When it comes to metaphysical realm, Indonesians are really prone of being exploited to a certain extent. To always submit to God is indeed a point of teaching in Islam.

The need for proper communication is even more apparent in a catastrophic outbreak like COVID-19. The national government was deemed to be sectarian, defying a critical approach. Despite being a religious society, Indonesia is in the verge of losing its critical ground due to an absolute state of theology.

In a succinct word, the government should have been critical, rational and open about the current situation they are dealing with and stop thinking about the success parameters of COVID-19 management issued by other nations. Rational approach could have given ways to discussion in better handling the virus.

At the end of the day, proper communication of crisis is a must, enabled massively by comprehensive understanding of the situation. To put it more correctly, critical thinking should be the main element, with

spiritual aspect becoming the filler. Communicating a message is not only about transferring an idea to the public; rather, it is more of assembling a social relationship to move forward, united. It is an interaction, intended to create a unity where people respect one another (Sikumbang, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

This article is aimed to signify that the ignorance of understanding the contexts of a crisis communication both a condition of public's needs and the risk of Corona virus are going to have failed in constructing the crisis communication. On the other words, an appropriateness in crisis communication will be going to assist public constructing their thought in dealing with this virus' threat. It indicates that the production of knowledge can become a mitigation to keep people's life away from Corona virus. It can finally find out that public do not have comprehensive, rational, and critical insights from that crisis communication to be built.

Asking public to do more praying and believe in God are proving on how the crisis communication built by government (The Minister of Health) losing its contexts and humanity sensitivity. By the principle of Goddess state and religious people, they are likely put the one and only in theology orientation, so that the only choice is to surrender the risk of Corona virus to the almighty God's destiny through praying in daily life. The lack of clarity about the theological spirit has narrowed the public's awareness in understanding the government's crisis communication messages which results them to more likely choose their own way of thinking (disobedient). The theological choice which has been believed to be able to reduce or prevent the jeopardy of the impact of Covid-19 do not present at all the capacity of the crisis communication message. On the other words, the background of the state and society that adhere to divine principles do not guarantee the triumph of the crisis communication message.

This study is limited to the Minister of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, Terawan Agus Putranto, as a single figure or subject in this study. Nevertheless, the choice of the Minister of Health is quite representative of the world health authorities in Indonesia which is of

course directly related to the Corona virus case. In addition, this research contributes sufficiently in explaining on how the crisis communication message (language) is not properly and clearly constructed. By understanding a context more comprehensively, rationally, and critically as well as humanitarian sensitivity that has an impact on the crisis communication, the government can design the crisis communication messages specifically to accommodate the public to avoid all kinds of crisis threats faced including of the Covid-19 virus. In the end, this study needs to carry out further studies, especially in the phenomenology approach with critical paradigm of how certain public assess government participation to prevent and fight the risk of the Corona virus through crisis communication practices and construct their thought independently beyond from government's viewpoints.

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