

Examining the debate on government's communication strategies for covid-19 management in online media: A content analysis

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has had far-reaching effects worldwide, impacting various aspects of society and the economy. For this, governments have faced significant challenges in addressing this global crisis. Amidst the outbreak, there have been public debates and disputes surrounding government communication and policies related to Covid-19. The lack of public understanding of the implemented measures has led to criticism of the government's response, seen insufficient and ineffective in communicating with the public. This study focuses on analyzing controversies and debates surrounding government policies during the early stages of the pandemic. Using a quantitative content analysis approach, the study examined policy content sourced from popular Indonesian news media portals. The research findings indicated that the president played a central role in conveying government policies, which primarily focused on macro-level strategies to combat the pandemic. However, the communication of these policies has generated significant controversy and discord among the public.

Keywords: government communication; news media portals; COVID-19 pandemic

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on global health, economy, and society. The outbreak of the virus, known as SARS-CoV-2, originated from Wuhan, China in December 2019 and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 (WHO, 2020). Since then, various countries, including Indonesia, have been significantly affected by the virus. Indonesia reported its first case of Covid-19 in March 2020, prompting the government to implement measures aimed at controlling the spread of the virus (Jefriando, 2020).

To curb the virus transmission, the Indonesian government implemented social distancing measures, encouraged remote work, and conducted rapid testing (Pangestika, 2020). However, there were the instances of non-compliance with these policies with some individuals and organizations failing to adhere to the guidelines. Controversies emerged regarding certain policies, such as restrictions on religious gatherings and the proposed imposition of civil emergency measures. The implementation of Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB) also faced criticism due to concerns about its potential negative impact on the economy and specific community groups (Samboh, 2020).

Additionally, concerns have been raised about the lack of coordination between local and central government policies, as

well as the decision to release prisoners to prevent the spread of the virus in prisons (Yasmin, 2020). Critics questioned the necessity of this policy and expressed the fears of increased crime rates resulting from the release of inmates (Pangestika, 2020). These controversies highlighted the challenges faced in implementing effective Covid-19 policies and the existence of diverse perspectives on the government's approach.

Two key factors contributing to these controversies and polemics were the lack of public understanding and ineffective communication from the government. The response from the government has been perceived as faltering with sporadic and disjointed communication efforts. The overlapping and sometimes conflicting policies caused confusion among the public, further exacerbating the controversies (Jefriando, 2020). To address these challenges, it is crucial to analyze the prevailing themes within the debates and discussions surrounding government policies on Covid-19.

To shed light on these controversies and polemics, a research study aims to examine the content of discussions and debates that emerged in online media platforms regarding the government's approach to the Covid-19 crisis. The study focused on the analysis of the content of these discussions to identify the prevailing themes. By understanding the public discourse, this research attempted to contribute to a better understanding of the impact of government policies on society.

This research study is deemed significant due to its novelty and direct relevance to the interests and current situation of society. By examining the public discourse surrounding government policies, the study aims to provide some valuable insights into the effectiveness and societal implications of these

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policies. Moreover, the research held practical value as its findings prioritized the scientific facts over political considerations, providing benefits in terms of evidence-based decision-making and policy formulation.

Government policy or public policy arises from extensive interaction among decision-makers in response to a specific issue that requires a solution. Put simply, public policy refers to the government's process of translating their political vision into practical programs and actions aimed at achieving desired outcomes in the real world (Peters, 2015). Similarly, Ealau and Pewitt (Ealau & Pewitt, 1973) defined policies as regulations exhibiting consistent and repetitive behavior, either by those who create them or those who implement them. Building on this understanding, Edi (Suharto, 2014) described policy as a set of guiding principles that direct planned and consistent actions to accomplish specific goals.

Public policymaking is a dynamic, complex, and interactive system. It involves identifying and resolving public problems through the creation of new policies or the reform of existing ones. The process of developing public policy entails three key elements: policy actors, public policy itself, and the policy environment (Dunn, 2004). Additionally, the criteria for effective public policy are based on several factors, including establishing social order, diagnosing problems, identifying the appropriate agency for action, considering and assessing policy options, implementing and enforcing organizational changes, and evaluating policies.

According to William Dunn, as cited in Winarno (Winarno, 2007), public policymaking comprises five stages: agenda setting or formulation, policy formulation, policy adoption, policy implementation, and policy evaluation.

In general, public policy outcomes can be classified into three types: public macro or general policy, which represents foundational policies often tied to ideological beliefs and legislation; meso public policy, which refers to medium-sized policies that provide explanations for implementation; and micro public policies, which regulate the implementation or execution of specific public policies (Tangkilisan, 2003).

Publicly resolved policy communication includes various forms such as hearings, debates, editorial pages in newspapers and magazines, radio broadcasts, and talk shows. It plays a significant role in public policy, encompassing laws, regulations, and information conveyed through speeches, mass media, and telecommunications. Additionally, communication itself becomes a focal point of policy as governmental and non-governmental organizations strive to inform and educate the different segments of the public regarding societal issues.

The significance of communication in public policy is underscored by Irish's statement, as cited by Young (Young, 2002), highlighting the potential for organizing and public involvement when individuals engage in communication to express their needs, address problems, and propose innovative solutions. The legitimacy of democratic governance and public policy is often contingent upon the effective and inclusive communication practices employed by governmental institutions. The moral integrity of the communication process and its interplay with public policy necessitate an inclusive approach. Information relevant to the public policy process possesses four key characteristics including helping to solve

problems, being action-oriented, carrying consequences, and being accessible to the public (Craig, 2000).

Within the realm of public policy communication, government communication adheres to several fundamental concepts during its implementation. These include the recognition of communication rights, the focus on policy and organizational aspects, the necessity for active communication, and the reflection of policy phases, (Vincent Price, 1992).

The main objective of this study is to identify the prevailing themes within the controversies and polemics related to government policies in handling Covid-19. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of the content of debates, arguments, and discussions that have emerged in online media, the research aims to contribute to a better understanding of the public discourse surrounding government policies and their impact on society. This understanding can inform future policy decisions and improve communication strategies to address the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Methodology

The aim of this research is to analyze news articles published on online media platforms between March 2020 and May 2020, discussing about government policies implemented to handle the COVID-19 crisis in Indonesia. This time frame was selected as it represented the beginning of the pandemic in the country and provided a period of relative stability in the situation. The government introduced various policies to address the challenges posed by COVID-19 (Daud Nasution, 2020).

To analyze government policy issues during this period, three widely accessed news portals, namely Kompas.com, CNN Indonesia, and Kumparan, were chosen as the primary sources. The focus was on three specific policy issues: the Perppu Corona (Government Regulation instead of Law), the implementation of Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB), and the prohibition of return to hometown (mudik bans).

A quantitative research method employing content analysis techniques was used to conduct this study. Content analysis involves a systematic and scientific examination of communication messages, including the classification of signs, establishment of criteria, and application of specific analytical techniques (Eriyanto, 2011). In this case, quantitative content analysis was chosen due to its distinct characteristics and research steps compared to other quantitative research methods.

The research process began by defining the concept and objectives of the study. Techniques were then determined, and processes and procedures were established to measure the chosen concept empirically, a process known as operationalization (Eriyanto, 2011). The concept was translated into observable and measurable units to facilitate analysis.

During the specified period, a comprehensive dataset comprising 789 news articles related to the three key policy issues for handling Covid-19 were collected from the selected online media sources. These articles underwent a thorough examination, utilizing specific analysis units and predefined categories, as presented in the accompanying table. The meticulous investigation aimed to extract valuable insights and identify trends from the collected data, facilitating a

comprehensive understanding of the discourse surrounding the government's policies in managing the Covid-19 pandemic.

By analyzing these news articles, this research sought to provide an in-depth understanding of the public discourse and perceptions surrounding the government policies implemented to combat Covid-19 during the specified time frame. The findings will contribute to a broader understanding of the effectiveness and impact of these policies on society. This study conducted an extensive analysis of multiple units and categorizations, including the type of policy submitted, the content of policy messages, the policy administrator, the types of communication policy, and the impact of policies, as visually represented in Figure 1.

Table 1. Analysis Unit Categorization

ANALYSIS UNIT	CATEGORIZATION
Type of policy submitted	1. Macro public policy 2. Meso public policy 3. Micro public policy
Contents Message Policies	1. Prevention 2. Handling 3. Follow-up
Policy Administrator	1. President 2. Minister 3. Spokesperson for the President 4. Government-appointed institutions 5. Governor 6. Mayor
Types Of Communication Policy	1. Proactive communication 2. Communication during policy implementation
Policy impact	1. Controversies 2. Discourse

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Type of policy

The Indonesian Government has actively implemented various policies and measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic since the announcement of the first case. These policies focused on preparedness, prevention, and curbing the spread of the virus within the country (WHO, 2020). The government's efforts aimed at effectively managing the crisis and protecting the health and well-being of the population.

One notable policy analyzed during the early phase of the outbreak was the PERPPU (“Government Regulation in Lieu of Law) on Coronavirus and the declaration of civil emergency.

As shown in Figures 1 and 2, the three online media namely kompas.com, kumparan, and CNN Indonesia display 789 news related to the type of policy and its impact. There are 288 news about PERPPU COVID (Covid government regulation) in the three media and are dominated by macro-type policy issues, reaching 98%.

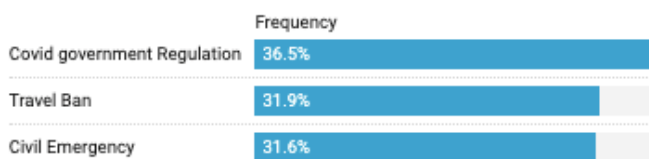


Fig. 1. Frequency of each issue/news

These policies possess a predominantly macro nature, aligning with the hierarchical structure of statutory regulations stipulated in Law Number 10 of 2004. The PERPPU on

Coronavirus provides a legal framework for the government to respond swiftly and effectively to the pandemic by granting certain authorities and powers to relevant agencies (Ghaliya, 2020). The declaration of civil emergency, on the other hand, empowers the government to take extraordinary measures to maintain public order and safety during the crisis (Ferdiansyah, 2020). These policies have a national-level impact, influencing the overall management of the pandemic in Indonesia.

Another significant policy examined was the implementation of Large-Scale Social Restrictions (*Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar/PSBB*). In 249 news articles covering civil emergencies and Large Scale Social Restrictions, the media primarily focused on macro policy issues, accounting for 95% of the coverage. This policy, also of a macro nature, involves the enforcement of stricter social distancing measures, temporary closure of public facilities, and limitations on community activities in high-risk areas (Galuh Bimantara, 2020). The aim is to reduce the transmission of the virus and prevent overwhelming healthcare systems. The PSBB has been implemented in various regions across Indonesia, adapting to the local situation and needs.

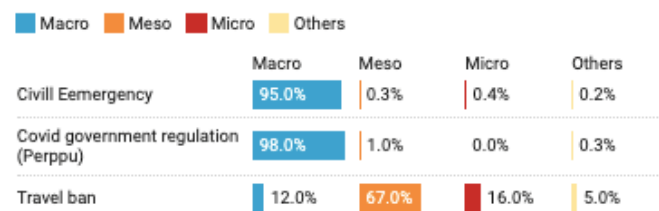


Fig. 2. Types of policies submitted

On the other hand, out of the 252 news pieces about mudik bans, 67% of them were dominated by the issue of meso policies. These policies were primarily conveyed through appeals issued by relevant ministries and regional authorities, such as the Ministry of Transportation and local governments (Ryan Aditya, 2020). The prohibition of back to hometown was a localized and specific measure targeting the movement of individuals within a given region or area. These policies aimed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 by discouraging people from traveling and urging them to remain in their respective locations during specific periods or circumstances, particularly during major holidays or religious festivals (Ryan Aditya, 2020).

In summary, the Indonesian Government has implemented various policies to address the COVID-19 pandemic, focused on preparedness, prevention, and management. The analyzed policies ranged from macro-level regulations such as the PERPPU about Coronavirus and declaration of civil emergency to meso-level measures such as the prohibition of back to hometown. These policies aimed to curb the virus transmission, protect public health, and ensure the safety of the population within the country.

3.2. Contents message policies

Based on analysis of 789 news articles, Figure 3 reveals that news focused on civil emergency and PSBB predominantly addresses the handling of Covid-19, accounting for 72% of the content. Conversely, news centered on PERPPU Covid mainly emphasizes Covid-19 prevention, comprising 57% of the

messages. Furthermore, news related to the mudik bans theme contains a higher percentage of messages on both Covid-19 handling (54%) and prevention (31%).

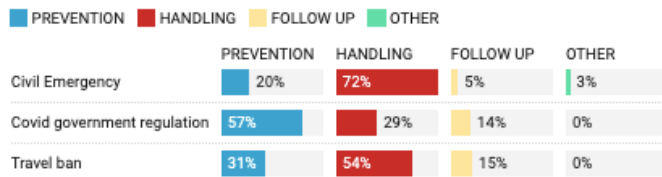


Fig. 3. Contents message policies

Based on the data, it is clear that the government has implemented a number of policies such as PERPPU about Corona as a proactive measure to tackle the imminent threat posed by COVID-19 and protect the stability of the national economy and financial system. This policy reflects the government's acknowledgment of the potential impact of the pandemic and its determination to mitigate its effects.

During the PSBB period, the government provided various economic stimulus and assistance to sectors affected by the pandemic. These measures encompassed social assistance, financial support for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), tax incentives, and other policy relaxations. The objective was to minimize the negative impact on the economy and facilitate recovery (Ikmal & Noor, 2022).

Furthermore, the mention of civil emergency measures such as the PSBB and travel restrictions during holidays demonstrated the government's emphasis on implementing measures to control the spread of the virus and ensure public safety. This was supported by reports indicating a decrease in daily COVID-19 cases. Previously, there was an increase in hospitalized COVID-19 patients, but after the implementation of the PSBB, this number decreased. This decline also affected the death rate attributed to COVID-19, which decreased as well (Kominfo, 2020).

Moreover, the heightened importance of these policies during the observance of Ramadan in May suggested the government's recognition of the potential risks associated with increased social gatherings and mobility during this period.

To summarize, the analysis of the research findings indicated that the policy through PERPPU about Corona was introduced proactively to address the threats posed by COVID-19 to the national economy and financial system. The implementation of civil emergency measures, travel restrictions, and social distancing policies further underscored the government's commitment to safeguarding public health and safety.

3.3. Policy administrator

Figure 4 shows that out of 249 news articles on civil emergencies and Large Scale Social Restrictions, and 288 news articles on PERPPU COVID (Covid government regulation), the president was cited as the main actor asked for his opinion or as a source in the news, accounting for 58.2% and 17.7% respectively, surpassing other parties, including members of the House of Representatives (DPR). Meanwhile, in the case of 252 news articles related to the mudik ban, the minister was the most frequently cited resource actor, followed by the president.

Based on the data, it can be inferred that the President

played a significant role in communicating government policies, particularly during civil emergencies and the implementation of large-scale social restrictions (PSBB). This indicated that the President was considered the primary figure in delivering crucial government policies to the public, especially those of strategic importance.

The involvement of ministers in discussions related to the bans mudik highlighted the collaborative nature of policymaking in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. It suggested that the government recognized the importance of input from multiple stakeholders in decision-making processes. This approach can lead to a more comprehensive and well-rounded policy response.

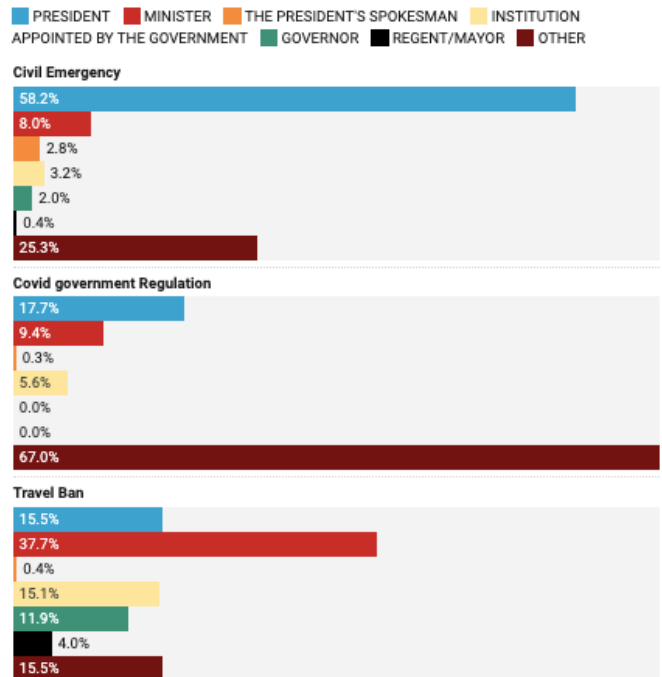


Fig. 4. Policy administrator

However, the involvement of various other parties, including the members of the people's representative council, in disseminating information about the policy of Corona PERPPU indicated a decentralized communication approach. This may suggest that the government attempted to ensure a broader reach and diverse perspectives in delivering information to the public.

The controversy and debate surrounding the implementation of civil emergency accompanied by large-scale social restrictions (PSBB) demonstrated the complexity of decision-making during a public health crisis. The President's support from ministers, the Chief of Staff of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI), and the Chief of Police indicated a coordinated effort to address the public health emergency. This collaborative approach can help in implementing effective measures and ensuring a unified response.

However, the criticism faced by the President and his communication efforts at the beginning of the pandemic revealed challenges in maintaining synchronization with lower-level officials. Inconsistencies in the information conveyed by different government representatives led to confusion among the public. Such confusion could undermine public trust and hinder the effective implementation of government policies. It

is crucial for the government to establish clear communication channels and ensure coordination among officials to avoid such inconsistencies and provide accurate and timely information to the public.

3.4. Types of communication policy

Based on the information provided in Figure 5, the analysis of the research findings indicated that active communication methods were predominantly employed in communication policies related to various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the use of PERPPU (Government Regulation instead of Law about Corona) reached 69.4%, civil emergency measures accounted for 68.7%, and PSBB (Enforcement of Community Activity Restrictions) reached 58.7%.

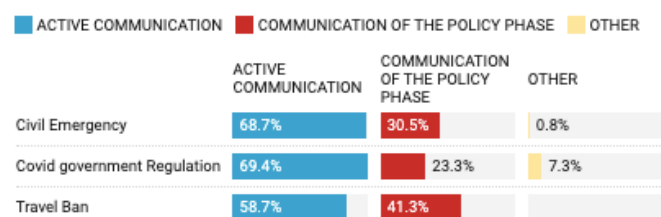


Fig.5 Types of communication policy

Active communication methods involve the proactive dissemination of information and engagement with the public, emphasizing the government's efforts in combating the spread of the coronavirus within the country. This approach is crucial in clarifying government initiatives and policies, ensuring that the objectives and reasoning behind their implementation are effectively communicated to the public.

In the case of the enactment of Perppu No. 1 of 2020, which addresses "State Financial Policy and Financial System Stability for Handling the COVID-19 Pandemic," the government's active involvement in communication activities demonstrated its commitment to provide comprehensive explanations to the public. By clarifying the objectives and reasoning behind the implementation of the PERPPU, the government aims to foster public trust and understanding of the measures taken to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the economy and society.

The effective transmission of precise data to the general public, policymakers, and the media has the potential to minimize risks, preserve lives and assets, and expedite the recovery process. Diminishing uncertainty plays a vital role in the act of communication, as the participants involved strive to alleviate doubts and ambiguity (Herfianto et al., 2022).

3.5 Policy impact

Figure 6 shows that out of all the news, the COVID PERPPU generated the most controversy (59%), followed by civil emergency and PSBB (48%). Meanwhile, the issues that had the most significant impact on public discourse were the travel ban during Eid al-Fitr, civil emergency, and PSBB. PERPPU Number 1 of 2020, concerning "State Financial Policy and Financial System Stability for Handling the COVID-19 Pandemic," has generated many pros and cons.

Travel ban during Eid al-Fitr has sparked extensive discussions and debates within the community. These discussions encompassed several aspects, including the issuance of a fatwa by the MUI declaring the back to hometown as forbidden (haram), the implementation of fines and penalties for those defying the homecoming restrictions, and limitations on transportation. On the other hand, the Corona Perppu became a highly controversial topic in society. Specifically, Perppu Number 1 of 2020, which addresses "State Financial Policy and Financial System Stability for Handling the COVID-19 Pandemic," garnered both praise and criticism. Various parties, including public figures and community organizations, voiced their opinions and concerns about the PERPPU. Notably, and legal actions were taken against it by Amien Rais and Din Syamsudin, but their attempts were ultimately unsuccessful in court.

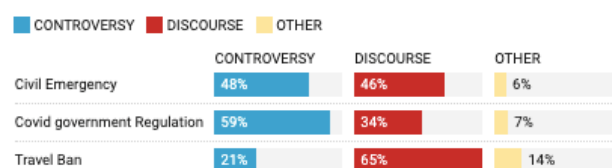


Fig. 6. Policy impact

During the period from March to May 2020, among the three media platforms analyzed, namely Kompas.com, CNN, and Kumparan, the most dominant news coverage revolved around the issues of the Corona Perppu and Civil Emergency.

4. Conclusion

This study revealed three key findings. Firstly, the president remained the primary spokesperson for communicating government policies. Secondly, the majority of government policies were on a macro level, specifically addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and lastly, these policies have predominantly sparked controversies, leading to varied reactions and opinions from the public.

Based on the findings of this study, there is a space for further research to explore the effectiveness of government communication in handling the Covid-19 pandemic. By examining the strengths and weaknesses of government communication, valuable insights can be gained to enhance future communication strategies.

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