

CENTRALIZED TO DECENTRALIZED: GOVERNMENT PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE IN INDONESIA'S POST REFORMATION ERA

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the emergence of local communities in post-reformation era in Indonesia as the impact of the decentralization system which had increased in the participatory and collaborative culture in public information as the major attention of Government Public Relations (GPR). The emergence of the Community Information Group (KIM) revealed that information dissemination as GPR activity transformed to be decentralized and based on local citizen empowerment. This research was conducted in Surabaya which has KIM role model. This research is a case study through in-depth interviews with seven local community activists and two elite GPR practitioners. This study indicates that the activists perceived that beyond as a local information disseminator, KIM extended other functions that identified more comprehensive in GPR practices through dialogic communication. These GPR practices ultimately have implications for strengthening local image building and identity to empower potential resources of the society. Afterward, these local resources would be expected to enhance the local citizens' capability in the spirit of economic competition culture.

Keywords: Decentralization, Local Community, Community Information Group, Government Public Relations, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Research on community contributions on GPR practices is not much revealed in the researches. The emergence of the community in public relations studies is merely perceived as a public or stakeholder. Nevertheless, Community development is the focus of public relations (Dhanesh, 2013; Brunner, 2017), especially when associated with democracy, researchers only emphasize the role of GPR in community development so far (Kim & Cho, 2019; Jin & Lee, 2013; Valentini et al., 2012). As Young (2014) stated, communication is a basic prerequisite for democracy. Public relations can benefit democracy by providing information subsidies as a focal point for the functioning of democracy through the provision of appropriate and important information for citizens.

Concerning to previous research, this study aims to examine the emergence of local community and its functions in Indonesia's post-reformation era that have marked by participatory and collaborative culture in the management of public information as the major attention in GPR. The local community is well known as Community Information Group (KIM) which has been formed as a social communication institution of the decentralization system in Indonesia.

In managing communications and public information services, KIM practices top-down communication with local government by disseminating government programs to citizens. On the other side, bottom-up communication is conducted to accommodate public issues and debates while at the same time to catch people's ideas and responses.

As Valentini (2018) stated the purpose of GPR activities is to execute its responsibility to provide information and services for citizens. The provision of information services can't be separated from the dynamics of a nation in terms of public information. Therefore, this research also reconfirms the findings of Fitch & L'Etang (2017), that the study of public relations in various countries requires an understanding of the history of each country and socio-cultural, political and economic aspects.

In the two decades of the implementation of decentralization in Indonesia, the central government still needs to ensure the capacity of local governments and the socio-economic conditions of citizens. It is done to ensure that this system accelerates regional development. In the social sector, this system then encourages the emergence of other actors besides the regional government in the delivery of public services. One of them is the dissemination of public information to build an information society (Talitha et al., 2019; Sidiq, Rd. Siti Sofro, Jalil, A., & Achmad, 2021) figure 1.

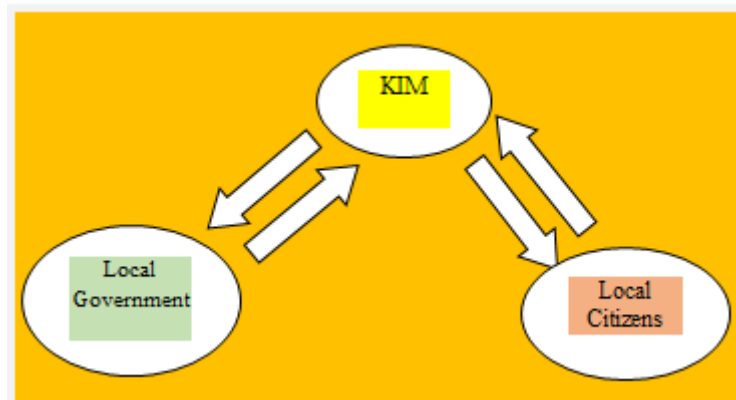


FIGURE 1
RELATION MODEL BETWEEN KIM WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL CITIZEN IN INFORMATION PRODUCTION AND DISSEMINATION

Source: Author's data

Information transparency is crucial for citizens for many reasons. First, this is an absolute requirement for democracy which also means the realization of limited power and is under public control. Furthermore, information transparency provides opportunities for people to participate in various public policies. Finally, this condition can at the same time encourages the creation of clean and good governance because the government and public bodies are required to provide comprehensive information about what they are doing in an overt, transparent and accountable manner so that trust is formed to the government.

KIM and Democratization of Indonesia's Post-Reformation Era

KIM was formed based on Indonesia's Ministry of Communication and Information regulation in 2010 as a concern for implementing the development and empowerment of social communication institutions. In practice, KIM is independent and neutral in conducting the distribution of information to support either the local or regional development. KIM has access to capture every problem of the wider society since is it in every urban village and its membership-based on elements of local social institutions. In this case, it is possible to have a dialogic communication with the public, stimulate the public debate, and encourage some public voices into the discourse of relations between organizations and the public so that it contributes to the participatory democratic process. Participation includes the expectation of local community members who have voices in the process of sharing power. Not only do citizens

know that they are politically represented, but also participation in the decision-making process is based on the interests of citizens (Moro, 2016).

The Communitarianism and Dialogic Communication in the Dynamic of GPR Function

Perspective on communitarians is not new ideas of thinking in public relations studies. This approach was initiated by Kruckerberg & Starck (1988) who stated that public relations are a function of community development, which shows that public relations is more clearly defined and practiced as an active effort to restore and maintain a sense of community in society. Kent, et al., (2016) argue that dialogue is an essential component of ethical community building and public relations is uniquely situated within the organizational hierarchy to help build communities through dialogue. Dialog is based on listening without resistance, reflecting underlying norms and approaches, and then generating new insights, knowledge, and a collective opinion (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018).

The Community is seen as different from the public. Based on the classical sociological definition, the public is a social coalition that is bound by a particular problem, where each individual has a personal interest. Conversely, the community has a broader concept by which groups have the same interests that are developed through the same experience. The community acknowledges sharing culture and building joint discursive activities (Hallahan, 2004). Newby (2008) identified community as social interaction based on geographical area, self-sufficiency, shared life, awareness and ownership of the same goals, norms and ways. According to Mcmillan (2011), community is as a resource for people to meet needs of affiliation, power and affection.

In the post-reformation era of Indonesia which democratization gets more established, local government is expected to become more proactive in public communication and truthful to increase critical society in dealing with public information. Thus, a social transformation occurs so the role and function of the GPR get even more demanded. Communication for social transformation suggests that context public relations activities would be more than just the transfer of information; rather, it becomes part of a social process in which organizations develop relationships based on mutual trust to build understanding and appreciation based on the community's point of view (Hodges & McGrath, 2011).

Decentralization of Information in Public Relations Perspective

The thesis on decentralization indicates the generation and distribution of information enhancement. It allows allocating participation in decision-making more broadly, creating autonomy, freedom, and pluralism (Pansardi, 2016). Information is a condition for the existence of power in organizations and a country, when information is shared, the authority of the central authority decreases and all who now have access to that information, become empowered. Informative citizens are the foundation of democracy, and the provision of information to stakeholders and the public is the essence of public relations. PR as a representation of an organization, has a contribution to democracy, considering that PR acts as an advisor to the organization, as well as accommodating a variety of voices and information to the organization (Kent, 2013). The role of GPR in a country is heading towards democratization. It can't be separated from publication activities and information dissemination. This finding confirms that in several Asian countries, including Indonesia, public information dissemination and publication are still mainstream GPR activities (Tantivejakul, 2019).

RQ1: How actually the activists of KIM perceive the function of KIM in the decentralized information era?

RQ2: How the elites of GPR' practitioners perceive their relations with KIM in disseminating information?

EQ3: What are the extended functions of KIM in its relevance to the recent contemporary world?

METHOD

The method of this study is a case study approach as in consideration of the emergence of KIM is a unique case in Indonesia's post-reformation era. A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates phenomena in real-life contexts, and where multiple sources of evidence are utilized. Case studies are suitable if the main question of a study is how or why (Yin, 2017).

This study aims to explore the point of view of key actors in public information in the decentralized system. To achieve this goal, researchers rely on purposive techniques so that researchers find people who are relevant to the research objectives. The number of participants in this study was nine persons consisting of two elites from local government PR practitioners in Surabaya and seven members of KIM. The seven persons were the seniors and activists who have been involved in KIM for more than a period of membership. They inhabit in east, west, south, and north of Surabaya. All interviews were conducted at the home base location of the activists and lasted about 90 minutes. To address the second research question, this study retrieved data from participants of local GPR practitioners in Surabaya. They were two of the elites of The Ministry of Communication and Information who are in charge of the division of Public Information Communication.

The data collection started from September 2019 to March 2020. All data were collected through observation and in-deep interviews that were recorded and then fully transcribed. The analysis was arranged with data summary, coding, formulating themes, clustering and presenting written stories.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Functions of KIM perceived by the activists in public information decentralization

Activities	Media Used	Aim	Main Stakeholders
1. Socializing government programs or policies (public information dissemination)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instant messaging • Social media (Facebook, Instagram) and Blog spot, to the wider public • Face to face to residents • Printed: Bulletin, notice board 	To build knowledge and transparency of public information as well as to encourage public participatio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local government agencies • Local citizens
2. Creating a network and communication forums with social institutions to exchange information and capture citizens' problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instant messaging • Focus group discussion • Regular meeting 	To formulate and convey the interests and needs of citizens as public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local government agencies • Local small-medium enterprises • Local media • local citizens

3. Conducting information management and social advocacy for public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media (Facebook, Instagram) Blog spot • Instant messaging • Community radio 	To avoid and fight hoaxes that cause outrage in society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local citizens • Local government agencies
4. Raising local potential through information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media: Facebook, Instagram and You tube • Face to face communication network • Community radio 	To provide economic value to local citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local media • Local small medium enterprises • Local citizens

Source: Author's findings

Public Information Dissemination

The activists generally state that they must produce accurate and credible public

Information as information volunteers. The development of ICTs impacts not only the quantity but also the quality of information; therefore KIM prevents the public from hoax and misleading information consumption.

We promote an action called "stop the news just in here" due to decreasing unclear, irresponsible, racial intolerance and hoax-indicated news (Boni, the former chairman of Surabaya KIM forum).

We do Information dissemination through KIM's media so local citizens can receive information about their region quickly (Topan, the chairman of KIM Klasik).

In the context of information dissemination, KIM is more significant in anticipating confusion of information about the implementation of new policies or programs. In obtaining information accuracy, KIM synergized with local government institutions, as well as other social institutions, such as youth clubs, health centers, or educational institutions to educate local citizens. This cooperation results in confirmation, coordination, and portraits of information and circulating issues. The synergy is also an effort to build stakeholders in the process of public information services to produce credible information products and support public trust.

Creating a Network and Communication Forums with Social Institutions

Building networks and communication forums with social institutions are conducted as bottom-up communication to figure out and formulate the needs, interests, and problems of citizens through utilizing WAG (WhatsApp group). The problems are then discussed both in the regional apparatus level starting from neighborhood, hamlet, urban village and the external level to obtain immediately the same picture of the problem identification. Thus, this model of communication contributes to forming a synergies network.

This kind of gathering is created not only just to meet each other but also to have a bond. We discuss everything, about social issues such as a case on cybercrime (Mahfud, the chairman of KIM Mesem).

Yes, this means that with the existence of these communication groups from the level of neighborhood to the urban village makes the problems easier to be solved (Markus, the chairman of KIM Mekar).

Conducting Information Management and Social Advocacy

The role of KIM which is also seen as significant for its activists is to mobilize citizens to be involved in information literacy activities so that they are not exposed to hoax news. Therefore, KIM makes communication media both offline and online as well as community radio so that citizens can confirm the news in the KIM media. Commercial media in some cases collect data and reporting information from KIM. KIM also facilitates communication and assistance between citizens and local government agencies to provide communication access and solutions to citizens' problems. The forum is a good opportunity to explain and convey the aspirations of the community to the government and discuss to find solutions to the problems of citizens.

For example, residents complain about blackouts and after we ask the National Electric Company, the problem can be resolved (Amin, the chairman of KIM Mojo).

Simple but disturbing and life-threatening things, such as speed traps. In some areas, it was made so high that many motorcycle riders fell. After we address this problem, the speed trap is finally dismantled, lowered (Yanuar, the chairman of KIM Rungkut Menanggal).

Problems such as the build-up of Wi-Fi cables which are messed and dangerous would be resolved soon when we report to the relevant agencies (Reno, the chairman of KIM Simbar).

Increasing Local Potential

As a heterogeneous city in terms of culture, ethnicity, and religion, Surabaya also has demographically diverse regional characteristics. Decentralization carried out by the central government has implications for the regional responsibility to be able to carry out promotional activities in their respective regions. KIM activists as local actors play this role maximally, as stated by several participants.

We capture local activities in the environment. Popularizing the potential of existing regions, in term of arts, culinary, tourism and SMEs (Edwin, the chairman of KIM Gundih).

All KIM activist activities write local potential and publish widely to netizens or the wider community as a simple form of local promotion (Suwardi, the chairman of KIM Pelangi).

Because of Gunung Anyar Tambak is the pond area, we took the initiative to make catfish ponds. This is one of the efforts to enhance the development of the region. So in terms of information, this activity would be published in Gunung Anyar Tambak's Blogspot so KIM covered two aspects within promoting the development of the region (Met, The chairman of KIM Gat Media).

Publications on local resources and communication programs are designed to make local citizens competitive in terms of capability and economy. The activities are also aimed to build a positive image and maintain the reputation of a region to obtain ultimately benefit from the publication. Each region has diverse potential resources according to its geographical conditions and the sociocultural traits of its citizens.

The Perceived Relationship of Elites of GPR' Practitioners with KIM in Disseminating Information

Distribution of Power in the Dissemination of Public Information

In interviews conducted with two local government PR elites, they saw the significant role of KIM as a local community that controlled the problems and needs of local citizens. This locality is then needed to develop each region in the decentralized system.

The significance of KIM is related to its role as a bridge of communication between citizens and the government. Exact local development gets originated, aimed, and supported by local citizens. KIM has an important role in realizing local development (Puri, head of information and public communication).

KIM's disseminating information is conducted in the local level. They create communication channels with local content. In contrast, we do engagement more closely with commercial media on a more general scale of news reporting (Ali, head of the public communication partnership section).

In encouraging understanding to the public, especially at the grassroots level, it requires a process that cannot solely rely on a bureaucratic approach. In some types of policies, the local government and public bodies do not have the largest resources and access to reach the local citizens. In this case, KIM is a strategic and an intermediary actor since its place is among the local citizens. It facilitates to meet government policy with the interests of citizens. KIM further also mobilized all elements of social institutions to participate in implementing local and regional development programs.

The Changing Perspective of Relationship

Decentralization has changed the pattern of relations between government and local communities and their citizens. Local GPR relations that previously only perceived local communities as objects of community engagement then shifted to partners and even actors who had crucial roles in the management and distribution of public information in the regions. In general, GPR develops best in countries with democratic environments that promotes transparent and bi-directional communication as a form of relationship management (Waymer, 2013). Focus group discussions, regular meetings, and mediated communication between the activists and GPR practitioners emphasize that in relations and partnerships in democratization require communication as a primary principle to establish harmonious and egalitarian relations. Democracy provides space for conversation and expression of both parties to identify information exposure, reception messages, and selective consumption of information sharing (Shah, 2016; Prawira et al., 2021). Moreover, the relationship between local GPR practitioners and KIM is seen as an equal partnership relationship.

KIM as a dominant coalition for local governments and government stakeholders is shown by their power in identifying and formulating the public needs and interests in regional development. This role is also conducted by providing channels as an arena for dialogic communication models for stakeholders. It is the basis of public relations such as communication network built with journalists, local media and local small medium enterprises. As consideration that journalists and media are crucial in publicity as Coombs & Holladay's (2014) statement, negative publicity can effect on social capital losses (symbolic loss) as well as intensifying material ones. Thus, the quantity and quality of public attention are valuable resources for stakeholders.

Extending the Functions through Dialogic Communication

Democratization in Indonesia in the post-reform era puts information as capital to empower citizens in participating and engaging with local and regional development. Community building then became an estuary to establish dialogic communication between the parties involved in those developments. KIM as a social communication institution facilitates community building by connecting stakeholders and local publics in exploring and gathering discourses of public needs and interests. The communication channel and discussion forums built by KIM are accesses to dialogic communication to equate the big picture of problems and to create mutual understanding and collaborative governance.

Today, KIM's communication activities on social and digital media such as Blogspot, Instagram, and Facebook, are increasingly dynamic to publicize local content as an effort to build engagement, local citizen participation, and social harmony which encourage democratization. Communicators specifically public information officers need social networking sites to provide adequate and relevant information to reinvigorate the democratic process

(Lambiase & Bright, 2016). The significant thing from this practice is that KIM plays a local actor who conducts information framing and encourages public discussion and dialog on the digital media to maintain positive image of urban villages and strengthen the sense of community figure 2.

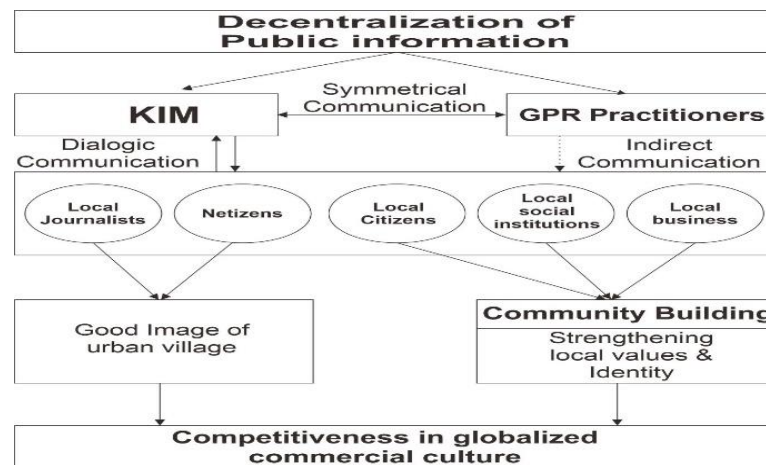


FIGURE 2

THE CHART OF THE EXTENDED FUNCTIONS OF KIM IN DECENTRALIZED GPR

Source: Author's creation, 2020

Local Image Management

The building of a positive image is generally executed through making information published in digital media such as social, blogs, and print media managed by KIM. Image maintenance is also performed by providing information to local journalists. In this case, the activists do not only involve in publishing engagement but also dialogue communication which emphasizes discussion and the listening process so that journalists would get an overview of events from the activists' point of view. Thus, the coverage in the mass media would encourage the maintenance of the positive image of urban villages. Lloyd & Toogood (2015) argued that the influence of newspapers and publications still offers value and credibility, thus remains a crucial element of PR strategies.

The activists also considered the use of digital media as acceleration in empowering information to reach and broaden the external public attention as well as a balancer to negative coverages and hoaxes. The activists realize that hoax reporting, especially on social media, will mislead the public and threaten the image and reputation of the region and cause the public to experience disinformation. Misinformation and disinformation are conceptually different from one another. Misinformation is defined as controversial information that reflects disagreement between people. On the other hand, disinformation is information that is intentionally misunderstood as hoax news (Jahng et al., 2020).

Strengthening Local Values and Identity in Globalized Commercial Culture

These factors impact the increase of locality and heterogeneous traits of social identity thus enhancing the feeling of pride of society. The utilization of social media by PR is not only merely related to authenticity, power, knowledge, social capital, dialogue, relationships, transparency, and truth but also the formation of identity (Motion et al., 2016). In this context, locality becomes an identity and then becomes an inseparable part of public relations studies (Sha, 2018).

At the level of value, the local value becomes an instrument for KIM to tie bonding between citizens and their social environment and stakeholders. This study reconfirms that common value is a crucial element to form social cohesion, such as a focus on the common good, social relations within the community, and emotional connection. The quality of social cohesion ultimately has a positive effect on life satisfaction among local citizens (Ponizovskiy et al., 2020). This social cohesion further contributes to participation and engagement. Taylor (2018) emphasizes the engagement as a third perspective, which integrates co-creational and functional perspectives in examining the role of PR in utilizing information and promoting citizen involvement in the decision-making process. In the context of the collaborative economy, GPR practices are supposed to keep building a circuit of communication between related stakeholders (Gregory & Halff, 2017; Sidiq & Achmad, 2020) to encourage social transformation as well as having the capacity to capitalize resources in the implementation of globalized promotional democracy (Cronin, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This research contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the function of the GPR in an effective decentralized system if it involves local communities as an extension of the function of the GPR in reaching heterogeneous communities. This research also confirms that the GPR practices are not about how just symmetrical two-way communication implemented between citizens and government instead, considering dialogic communication that allows citizens to formulate the appropriate model of communication that well suited to them through digital media utilization. This study also finds that local activists conduct decentralization of information with local content which is increasingly appreciated since the information is based on local public values and characteristics.

The function of KIM in information management in the decentralized era has made a major and massive contribution to regional development as well as local citizens through information. KIM is a manifestation of collaborative governance and a form of citizen participation in managing public information. The use of local values and wisdom as well as digital media by KIM in information management has implications for the empowerment of local resources so that it has an impact on regional economic development. KIM's maneuvers also enliven the euphoria of the locality so that a sense of community is a crucial essence in community building.

As a result, this study provides at least two contributions to both scientific development and society. Scientifically, this study found that community building is not only determined by feelings of trust, history, we-feelings, cooperation, and coordination. In the digital era, a sense of community and community building requires intensive use of information and communication technology as contemporary instruments for strengthening internal stakeholders and maintaining external stakeholder relations.

The contribution of this research to a heterogeneous society is to strengthen that the characteristics of the locality as a capital for the formation of community identity supports positive implications for social cohesion. As a result, people can empower themselves in an era of economic competition. In the context of community building, local activists are more flexible and precise in identifying local social problems than GPR practitioners who are limited by bureaucratic regulations and strict hierarchical relationships in building local communities.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

Despite the findings of this research, this research has some limitations. Firstly, this research just explored the dynamics of the local community which was engaged in the information decentralization of Indonesia post-reformation era and its relevance in the globalized world. Secondly, this research was examined in a qualitative approach. Further

research might be conducted in quantitative methods such as a measurement on an organization-online public relationship or public perception on KIM's role in the decentralization of information. More researches on community contributions in GPR are required since those kinds of researches are under-researched and certainly under-theorized.

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