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Efficacy information in Government’s initial responses to Covid-19 pandemic: A content analysis of the media coverage in Indonesia

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**ABSTRACT**

Inevitable uncertainty conditions during the Covid-19 crisis resulted in an extension of the inadequate information and knowledge shared about the pandemic. The media plays a significant role in reporting and communicating risks related to the global Covid-19 outbreak. People can respond well to the risk of coronavirus if they understand the impact of the pandemic through efficacy information about the pandemic. However, a previous study revealed that media organizations lack quick action and response to Covid-19. Furthermore, no study was found to understand how media provides efficacy information on the government’s early response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The study aims to examine and analyze the external efficacy information of the government’s initial responses during the early stage of the outbreak in four national online newspapers (Kompas.com, Tempo.co, Republika.co.id, Tirto.id). The articles were classified based on themes derived from the keywords search—effect/impact, response/action, policy/restriction on the Covid-19 pandemic, and assessed the pandemic’s most prominent external efficacy information within the local, national, and global context in each article in the four media. From 704 articles analyzed, our study revealed dominant-negative tones on the impact of the pandemic, including inconsistent actions and policies taken to prevent the transmission of the virus. Our study suggests that increasing positive efficacy information and improving media engagement are vital communication goals to better educate the public about the coronavirus and minimize uncertainty during the pandemic.

1. Introduction

Indonesia is one of the other developing countries severely impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. By 19 August 2021, there were 3,930,300 Covid-19 cases in the country, with 122,633 death (CFR: 3.1%) due to the coronavirus [1]. Besides health impacts, the Covid-19 outbreak causes the closure of many companies, tourism spots, a temporary suspension for public transportation. In addition, a reduction in working hours during and massive job loss at the early stage of the pandemic resulted in people’s financial problems. Meanwhile, the Indonesian government faces challenges of decreasing public trust in how officials handle the outbreak. The
government’s initial actions argued failing to prevent the increasing spread of the virus [2]. This condition is likely to impact the low level of public confidence in the government’s ability to overcome the pandemic.

A study exploring Indonesian people’s experiences with the Coronavirus outbreak in the initial establishment of the Covid-19 Rapid Response Task Force revealed citizens experiencing four types of psychological trauma. The trauma includes social withdrawal, hysteria, individual violence, and collective violence. This mental health condition is due to the lack of risk preparedness, the poorly equipped health care system, and the lockdown policy to prevent the spread of the coronavirus [3].

The media plays a significant role in reporting and communicating risks related to the global Covid-19 pandemic. Risk communication is essential to raise the public’s knowledge, awareness, and attitude about the emergency condition—Covid-19 [4]. The news about Covid-19 accelerated since they found the first case at the beginning of March 2020. The uncertainty during the pandemic is due to the limitations of the information and knowledge shared about that situation [5]. The concept of efficacy information refers to how people better respond to the risk of disaster, like the Covid-19 pandemic, if they recognize the adverse of the coronavirus outbreak and feel confidently able to take control of the impact of the pandemic [11,19]. However, a current study reveals a lack of initial and quick response to Covid-19 by the government’s Disaster Risk Reduction-related organizations, including media agencies [6]. In addition, a study on the impact of news coverage on Indonesian who return from abroad during the pandemic tends to face prejudice and unpleasant reception where people suspected them as virus carriers [7]. At the same time, the returning Indonesian felt anxious about getting infected by the virus [3].

Media strategies are necessary for resilience-building against biological hazards and pandemics. A recent study shows that the media has become an influential platform influencing government policy agenda-setting. A previous meta-thematic analysis of government response policy to the current Covid-19 pandemic found that governments worldwide have been providing the public with excessive policy responses, which creates uncertainty about the future development of the diseases. In addition, misinformation and rumors about the pandemic spread faster than accurate health information found online [30]. Likewise, instead of taking a vigilant attitude to the increased number of infections in Indonesia, the government made dubious statements about the coronavirus as not too dangerous. The government also considers that the virus, which initially developed in China, will not infect the Indonesian people. Several controversial statements by officials in Indonesia reflect a reactive attitude about the spread of Covid-19 in the country [31]. Kompas.com summarizes many controversial statements by Indonesian officials who initially denied the existence of the coronavirus, to the extent that they underestimated its contagious nature, which is now ravaging health and the economy. Nevertheless, no study has been found to understand how media provides efficacy information on the government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Efficacy information in the media can foster people’s awareness, knowledge, and concrete action on specific risk issues, such as health, environmental [8,9], or climate change [10,11]. The study aims to understand how the public receives information on the government’s initial responses to the Covid-19 pandemic within the local, national, and global context. We conduct a content analysis to assess the external efficacy information about the Covid-19 pandemic in the four national online newspapers to answer the research question.

2. Literature review

2.1. Media and risk communication

Each state government communicates to its people to disseminate information, policies, and programs. However, in a disaster situation such as the Covid-19 outbreak, public communication is carried out through a different and more specific form, namely risk communication. Risk communication involves exchanging information, advice or consideration, and opinions. Risk communication is part of disaster mitigation and happens with health, economic, and social welfare threats between experts and the public [12]. Effective risk communication is necessary for this unprecedented Covid-19 condition. Besides warning people of the actual hazard of the pandemic, risk communication aims to reassure people to minimize the risk [13]. Understanding risk perceptions is essential to developing effective and appropriate risk communication. Transparency is a prerequisite for the public to receive, process, digest, and use the available information [14]. In addition, individuals, communities, and society perceive risk communication as a complementary sociocultural approach. Poor risk communication may lead to uncertainty and increase people’s risk perception, influencing individual protective behaviors; however, how people perceive risk does not correlate with the actual risk. For instance, people may perceive the pandemic harms health, well-being, and livelihood, yet, people lack compliance with the health protocols recommended by the government.

Furthermore, the government’s risk communication ability strongly influences public trust. Poor communication may decrease government trust within the current crisis [15]. The Indonesian government argued has not well-communicated the public with efficacy information. The government’s briefing, media reporting, experts’ views, and interpersonal discussion of the pandemic consist of different and inconsistent data. The seemingly ignorant response about the virus as not harmful resulted in people feeling confused and anxious [31]. Zarsky (2015) argues that unfettered and lack of transparent information undervalues the merits of people’s confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity could influence public trust [16]. For example, people who are confirmed positive for Covid-19 and have their information published in the media tend to experience stigmatization [17]. Communicating the uncertainty appropriately in risk information allows for achieving important risk communication goals with only limited effects on trust [18]. An appropriate quantity and quality of information (efficacy information) through media platforms is necessary to develop effective risk communication, including efficacy information about the pandemic.

2.2. Efficacy information coverages

Efficacy information is a significant aspect of mass media coverage. The concept is profoundly used to address the issue of health
and environmental risk. Efficacy information helps people respond to risk at personal and societal levels [8,11]. The goal of efficacy information is to enable people exposed to the risk of making decisions based on information needed to protect themselves and others, changing beliefs or behavior. Thus, the success of efficacy communication influences public compliance in handling Covid-19, both preventive and curative.

This study focuses on how the mass media convey efficacy information. The content analysis draws from the efficacy information concept used in studies about media coverage of climate change in the US and Indonesia [10,11]. Media coverage of the government’s initial response to the pandemic is differentiated based on external or societal efficacy. Our content analysis examines the external efficacy information related to government or politicians’ efforts to take positive and negative actions or respond to public opinion [10].

3. Methods

This content analysis focuses on the government’s initial response to Covid-19 in four online news sources: Kompas.com and Tempo.co, Republika.co.id, Tirto.id. The four selected media are national reputable online news platforms with a large readership. Kompas.com is part of the Kompas Group printed newspaper Kompas, a prominent of newspapers in Indonesia. In her book Challenges from Within, Annet Keller emphasizes that the Indonesian elites mostly read Kompas (2009: 45). The newspaper is well-known for maintaining an attentive and unbiased language style. Likewise, Tempo.co is the online format of a printed newspaper that is no longer published. The Tempo newspaper and magazine are media with critical perspectives towards the government.

Meanwhile, Republika.co.id is an online media from the daily printed version of Republika newspaper. This newspaper has a circulation of approximately 100,000 copies per day. Republika is widely read by Muslims and is considered the “Islamic Media” that represents the pride of the ummah [19]. The founders and managers of Republika are moderate Islamic groups and are explicitly stated in their vision and mission [20]. Tirto.id is an online media established in the reform era and positioned itself as a media that focuses on investigative coverages and critical position to the government policies.

The study’s unit of analysis is the news/article—coverage on Covid-19 collected since the first announcement of Covid-19 cases in Indonesia (March 2020) and since the government released the first restriction of social/physical distancing. In addition, we included articles in Bahasa Indonesia about the pandemic, with the keyword strings: dampak, penanganan, kebijakan (translated as effect/impact, response/action, policy/restriction). Different from previous research that included sixteen codes [10] or twelve codes [11] of efficacy information, for this content analysis, we focus only on external efficacy (negative and positive). We turned the positive and negative codes into six by coding whether the topic covered was information about the pandemic in the global, national, or local context. For example, we included ‘external-efficacy – positive – global’ and ‘external-efficacy – positive– national’ and external-efficacy – positive– local’ in the place of their single code for ‘external-efficacy – positive.’ Likewise, we applied the same coding technique for the coverages that demonstrate negative tones. The stages of this study include (1) developing conceptual and operational definitions and compiling coding sheets based on conceptual definitions (see Table 1), (2) determining the research analysis unit, (3) coding the frequency of the news (see Table 2), and (3) analyze and explain the findings by themes.

4. Findings

We collected 704 news and articles (see Fig. 1). The total is not calculated by single coverage scope (local, national, global). Still, each piece may contain coverage of the pandemic in more than one scope (e.g., local and national, or national and global). For example, in Kompas.com, one news talks about the Covid-19 in national and global context [32].

KOMPAS.com - Indonesia announced its first two cases of coronavirus infection, which President Joko Widodo conveyed at the State Palace Monday (2/3/2020). The Wuhan coronavirus, Covid-19, has infected 89,132 people worldwide. Based on data from the China National Health Commission (NHC) reported by the South China Morning Post, worldwide, as many as 89,212 people were infected with Covid-19, and a reported 3048 people died.

We classified the coverages based on the three news categories, (1) effect/impact of the pandemic, (2) response/action, and (3) policy/restriction undertaken by the government to fight the outbreak. The news was coded and presented only for the type of external efficacy information that was the most prominent in each article.

Table 1

| Concept                        | Operational Definition                                                                 |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| External Efficacy for global issue | Refers to the responsiveness of political or corporate elites to public opinion and/or calls for action to the Covid-19 at global level |
| —positive                      |                                                                                        |
| External Efficacy for global issue | Refers to the failure of political or corporate elites to respond to public opinion and/or calls for action the Covid-19 at global level |
| —negative                      |                                                                                        |
| External Efficacy for national issue | Refers to the responsiveness of political or corporate elites to public opinion and/or calls for action to the Covid-19 at national level |
| —positive                      |                                                                                        |
| External Efficacy for national issue | Refers to the failure of political or corporate elites to respond to public opinion and/or calls for action the Covid-19 at national level |
| —negative                      |                                                                                        |
| External Efficacy for local issue | Refers to the responsiveness of political or corporate elites to public opinion and/or calls for action to the Covid-19 at local level |
| —positive                      |                                                                                        |
| External Efficacy for local issue | Refers to the failure of political or corporate elites to respond to public opinion and/or calls for action the Covid-19 at local level |
| —negative                      |                                                                                        |
Derived from the three categorizations, effect/impact, response/action, and policy/restriction), our content analysis comes up with three themes of the government’s initial response to the pandemic: (1) pandemic as a disaster (impact), (2) rudimentary crises responses (action), and (3) inconsistent public communication (policies). Our content analysis reveals negative tones on coverages of Covid-19 in the global, national, and local context, mainly three months since the Indonesian government announced the first Covid-19 case in March 2020.

4.1. Pandemic as a disaster

The study findings reveal negative tones of the reporting on the pandemic at the global, national, and local levels. The highest percentage of the dominant information in the mass media is in the impact category, namely a row of numbers that show an increase in people exposed to Covid-19, who are sick and who die. The four media reported the Covid-19 case negatively globally, namely Kompas.com 38%, Tempo.co 11%, Republika.com 15%, and tirto.id 22%. Series of information and data about victims of Covid-19 dominate the media content even though it has entered its third month (the same trend in reporting from the first month to the third month). For instance, as reported by Tirto.id, on the first Covid-19 case found in Depok, the coverage focuses on the severe impact of the case, resulted in severe stigmatization to the victims.

tirto.id - Spokesperson for handling Covid-19, Achmad Yurianto, announced the death case of patient number 35. The female patient is claimed to have been sick on a ventilator. However, then, the government has not received the results of the Covid-19 examination until the patient dies. “The Covid-19 test has not yet been carried out. Then the deterioration became fast that day also died. The results from the specimen turned out to be positive,” Yuri said at the Presidential Office, Jakarta, Friday (13/3/2020).

Most coverages report the increased number of Covid-19 cases and deaths due to infectious disease at the national and global levels, and news about recovered patients in the USA, the Netherlands, China, Italy, and Nigeria [21]. However, less about how the government responded to the outbreak, and fewer about the government’s policy. At the same time, the World Health Organization (WHO) urges the government to better response to the coronavirus outbreak, as reported by Tempo.co [35].

TEMPO.CO, Jakarta - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed a letter from the World Health Organization (WHO) to the Indonesian government regarding the handling of the Corona virus or Covid-19. From a copy received by Tempo, it is known that the letter was sent on March 10, 2020. WHO also gave advice that asked to be taken seriously to prevent this virus from spreading. Some suggestions include improving the emergency response mechanism, including for the government to declare a national emergency immediately.

| Media          | Global          | National       | Local           |
|----------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|
|                | Positive | Negative | Positive | Negative | Positive | Negative |
| Kompas.com     | 13      | 38        | 6         | 23        | 2        | 18        |
| Tempo.co       | 7       | 11        | 37        | 26        | 11       | 8         |
| Republika.co.id| 9       | 15        | 31        | 7         | 29       | 9         |
| Tirto.id       | 4       | 22        | 7         | 32        | 3        | 32        |
| Total          | 33      | 86        | 81        | 88        | 45       | 67        |
4.2. Rudimentary crises response

Coverage of the response/action category on national news was significant within the first month after the official announcement of the Covid-19 case in Indonesia. At the national level, more than one month after the government announced and acknowledged the Covid-19 case in Indonesia, the new government issued a policy through Presidential Decree number 12 of 2020 and declared Covid-19 was a national disaster.

The news reports are primarily about forming the Covid-19 Task Force (Satgas Covid-19). The Task Force ranges from national to regions and districts and involves many stakeholders, such as academics, researchers, media, business and industries, and society under Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Bencana (BNPB). As reported in Republika.co.id [34].

REPUBLIKA.CO.ID, MINAHASA TENGGARA - The district government (Pemkab) of Southeast Minahasa, North Sulawesi has formed a task force (task) to deal with any indications of the spread of the Covid-19 virus in the area. The task force was formed through a decree (SK) of the local regent.

The Ministry of Health at the time—Terawan Agus Putranto, argued that the strategy to fight the pandemic needs to begin by breaking the chain transmission of the coronavirus [22]. Instead, the central government’s policies and actions are framed through normative statements by authorized officials, such as the Ministry of Health and the National Covid-19 Task Force.

4.3. Inconsistent public communications

The government’s policies responding to the pandemic at the central and regional levels are also not well coordinated. Each region arranges its policy; and is very diverse [2]. For instance, as reported in Tempo.co [33], in the early stage of the pandemic (March 2020), the government announced a controversial statement that the coronavirus is not harmful.

TEMPO.CO, Yogakarta- The Ministry of Health asked the public not to overreact to the coronavirus case in Indonesia after two Depok residents were confirmed positive. “The virus is not contagious if there is no direct contact,” said Secretary of the Directorate General of Disease Prevention and Control (P2P) of the Ministry of Health Achmad Yurianto at the Presidential Palace Complex, Jakarta, Monday, March 2, 2020. Yurianto said the virus could not spread through the air and inanimate objects. Therefore, people do not need to stay away from their homes or dance venues for the Depok residents who are positive for Covid-19. “The virus must have a host. If it is outside the body, it will die in 5–10 min,” said Yuri.

Moreover, each ministry has various ways of handling it due to the unclear prevention and management policies. The percentage of reporting on the government’s action to the pandemic is limited to coverage within the capital, Jakarta; that is only about patients who are indicated positive, not about massive prevention to control the coronavirus transmission. News coverage of the government’s prevention intervention in Jakarta was related to implementing rapid tests at the community health center or Puskesmas, where the cases in this city by 3 April 2020 had reached 958 people [23]. There is not much coverage about the spread of coronavirus in other provinces or districts. Furthermore, the Ministry of Health (Kementerian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia) has approved the implementation of large-scale social distancing or Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar (PSBB) in the Jakarta area [24]. However, this policy is not applied thoroughly in other red zone areas. There are four regional categories related to the spread of Covid-19: high-risk areas marked with a red zone and medium risk areas marked with an orange zone. Then, low risk with a yellow zone and a green zone explains that districts/cities are not or have not been affected [35].

5. Discussion

This content analysis study found more national coverage about the government’s impact/effect, response, and policy or action to Covid-19 than local and global news. More news reports within national contexts because media with national coverage were the first to disseminate the information regarding the pandemic. While local media usually repost the national news. For example, the news on the first case found in Depok and the controversial government’s statement of the status of Covid-19 as not dangerous.

The study found that coverages have more negative tones, which involve three aspects: (1) The impact of the pandemic as a catastrophe demonstrated by news about the numbers of Covid-19 causalities; (2) the establishment of the Covid-19 Task Force showcases the government’s primary and standard responses in handling the pandemic; and (3) the information about the health crises delivered to the public varies and is inconsistent.

The media’s negative coverage patterns of reporting cannot be separated from the government’s performance in the early days of Covid –19 until the first three months of Covid-19 were officially recognized by the government. The government response to the pandemic was limited to data collection of Covid-19 cases, such as Covid cases, deaths, and recoveries, mostly in European and American countries. Many coverages refer to news from global media platforms, including quoting statements from the World Health Organization (WHO) as the official source on updates about the pandemic.

The negative coverages is due to how the Indonesian government demonstrates many shortcomings in providing public information about the pandemic [25]. The government is still focused on the medical response in health services (hospitals) and not on comprehensive prevention efforts. Mas’udi and Winanti (2020) emphasize that the government’s initial response to Covid-19 indicate that pandemic has not become a serious issue and the government’s agenda-setting [26]. Moreover, official information about handling, namely, preventing transmission at the individual, family, and community level, does not become the media’s attention. The government did not respond to the scarcity of facilities and infrastructure to deal with the impact of Covid-19. These shortcomings are supported by previous studies on people’s information seeking about Covid-19. The study found that limited information related to the government’s effort to provide information about how to prevent the spread of coronavirus and how to treat Covid-19 patients. There is no adequate management system to adapt or control the spread of the coronavirus, including national guidelines to deal with the health pandemic. The emergency nature and limited credible sources that can convey one-way official information to the public are the
reasons for the less efficacy information that the public expected. The insufficient information by the media information has the potential to generate hoaxes or false information submitted by untrustworthy sources [25,36]. In addition, what was reported in the media tends to be inconsistent with what happened in the field. Such as access and availability to health facilities and tools such as masks, hands-on agents, PPE, independent isolation rooms, and hospital care are absent from media reports.

The problem of preventing transmission and the economic impact of Covid-19 has not become the government’s attention resulting in governance crises, weak vertical and horizontal coordination, fragmentation of policies, confusion of information, and indications of public doubts about the government’s capacity to manage crises. According to Reynolds, Deitch, & Schieber (2007), the condition uncertainty occurs due to the higher case intensity and limited shared information or lack of efficacy information [5]. Wood Bernadette (2021) argues that effective communications and leadership are central to the management of pandemics and the rapidly changing societal and economic landscape [27]. Furthermore, he suggests that successful crisis communication in a pandemic depends on high levels of trust contingent on shared values between actors and includes confidence that future developments will occur as expected. Moreover, a comparative analysis of public opinion and public health in 35 countries by Herrera et al. revealed that most leadership performances are negative when no appropriate policies are taken to curb the pandemic [38].

In addition, Siegrist and Zinng (2014) also stress that a transparent information strategy is necessary to enable people to act. They assert that transparency failures can undermine trust in institutions [28]. According to Boudier (2022), about the challenges of risk communication in the pandemic era, there is a need to prioritize leadership qualities and trust in addressing the pandemic. Including leaders’ interaction and relationship with media [37]. News coverage tends to follow and quote government resources as the primary data source for information about the pandemic. This study indicates that there is a lack of media engagement, that is between media organizations and the government. The government is expected to act quickly and decisively in responding to the public’s communication and information crisis.

Furthermore, the information about Covid-19 is communicated through online media with easy access to get data. Online media compile news, and coverage is influenced by data availability and speed of coverage. Online news portal media applies the principle that negative information or ‘bad news’ is actually ‘good news.’ Through their ‘clickbait’ (headlines that focus on bombastic news). This media practice will likely attract the public’s attention because information on the increased number of patients from day to day is considered exciting news, considering information needed by the public.

Nevertheless, online media has a positive role in building subjective norms of people’s behavior to prevent Covid-19. For example, research carried out by Liqun Liu and Jingzhong Xie (2020) showed that mass media exposure had a significant positive impact on subjective norms and could significantly enhance preventive behavior, subjective norms and social networking services [29]. Therefore, sufficient coverage on community empowerment and involvement in handling the pandemic has a significant impact on countering negative perceptions about the adverse effect of the health crises, such as news about groups of women voluntarily sewing masks and distributing them to the community.

This paper identifies the pattern of the government’s external efficacy information about the Covid-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, the timeline was limited for information covering the outbreak’s early stage. Therefore, further study is required to explore and compare the media coverage between the early and during the pandemic. However, the findings revealed provide significant recommendations for media practice to provide sufficient information or efficacy information within risk communication practice to minimize the uncertainty situation at the early stage of the pandemic through more robust media engagement between the government and media agencies.

6. Conclusion

The four national online news content analyses show that governments have not provided efficacy information in handling the Covid-19 pandemic. Coverages regarding the government’s responses on the impacts, actions, and policies reveal more negative than positive ones within the local, national, and international settings. Evidence suggests that the media is responsible for reporting positive information about the pandemic during a crisis, which prevents the public from anxiety and uncertainty. Communication is becoming the most crucial part, especially when delivering the facts. Thus, the government needs to engage and work closely with the media agency to deliver efficacy information that significantly shapes public perception of the pandemic.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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