Framing COVID-19 by an anglophone newspaper outlet

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Abstract. Studies on media coverage and pandemics predominantly focus on the global North. Little is known about how the media in a global South setting is reporting the development of such a global crisis as it evolves. This paper aims to fill the gap by observing an Indonesian anglophone newspaper outlet, The Jakarta Post. Using lexical and statistical analysis on 539 articles, the current study finds the focus of the coverage has been on how the government is managing the crisis. The framing by The Jakarta Post re-emphasises the very nature of the Indonesian economy, which is heavily relying on the informal sector, thus, making the decision to apply a full lockdown rather dilemmatic. The national-local political dynamics are also at play as it shapes the communication of crisis management in Indonesia.

Keywords: COVID-19, media, framing, Indonesia.

1. Introduction

Like other public health crises, the unfolding of COVID-19 pandemic poses detrimental effects on the physical and psychological wellbeing of citizens [1]. The highly contagious disease has been spreading globally since the end of 2019. However, different countries have been responding differently as reflected by the mass media [2], [3]. Media coverage of the pandemic is essential for the dissemination of information to the public about health risks and events [4]. Furthermore, by framing, the media decide what to emphasize and what to omit from coverage [5].

Studies on media coverage and pandemics predominantly focus on the global North [5], [6], [7]. Little is known about how the media in a global South setting is reporting the development of such a global crisis as it evolves. This paper aims to fill the gap by observing an Indonesian anglophone newspaper outlet, The Jakarta Post [8]. Two research questions posed here were “What topics were prominent in Indonesian newspaper’s coverage of COVID-19?” and “How was the national-local political dynamics interplay in crisis communication?”.

2. Methodology

Two coders traced back the articles in the last six months up until April 7, 2020. The content was collected using the online information and research tool, Factiva. The words “coronavirus” and “COVID” were entered into the search bar, using the operator command “or”. The option “In the last 6 months” was selected from the ‘Date’ drop down menu, and the ‘Duplicates’ drop-down menu was opted “off”. In the ‘Source’ column, “The Jakarta Post” (publication) was inserted, as we only wish to
get the print articles that appeared in the hard-copy version of the newspaper. The default settings of “All Authors”, “All Subjects”, “All Industries”, and “All Regions” were left untouched. The final corpus consisted of 539 items and the details of each article can be found in Appendix 1.

Leximancer text analytics software (LexiPortal 5th edition) was used to analyze how a global South anglophone news outlet is framing the COVID-19 pandemic. The software generates concepts and themes using unsupervised learning on the basis of inputs, including frequency and pattern of co-occurrence [9]. The concepts refer to keyword groups that co-occur most frequently within the text, and the themes indicate the group of concepts that are clustered on the concept map. To complement the lexical analysis, Voyant Tool software was used to determine the frequency of national and local leaders being mentioned in the articles [10].

3. Results and discussion

Despite some reports from The Jakarta Post since January, 2020, the Indonesian government had been in denial of the COVID-19 pandemic with President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo planned to offer discounts of up to 30% to attract tourists. He even allocated millions of dollars to pay social media influencers for tourism promotions. A series of statements from his ministers that downplayed the scale of the threat were also reflected how Jokowi’s administration is bound to fail to respond to the obvious.

It was not until March 2, Indonesia finally acknowledged the disease had reached the country. Articles on COVID-19 soared since the announcement of the first case with the trendline suggesting the health crisis has finally become a national discussion (see Figure 1). The number of confirmed cases in Indonesia has also grown at an exponential level with a death rate that is almost double the global mortality rate of 4.8% [11].

![Figure 1. Number of Confirmed Cases and Articles on COVID-19 since January 2020.](image)

The lexical analysis on the final corpus, presented here as a concept map (see Figure 2), reveals concepts (shown as small gray nodes), which are grouped into themes (the larger colored bubbles). “COVID” is the strongest theme in the narratives of articles published by The Jakarta Post during the pandemic. It is well connected with other concepts, such as people tested positive, number of cases, and cities or places where patients reside. The theme and concepts have been mentioned 2,567 times in the 539 articles observed. A typical quotation of “COVID” is: “The spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is growing worse. Indonesia reported that the number of people who tested positive for COVID-19 had surpassed 1,600 on April 2, 2020.”
Figure 2. Themes and Concepts in Articles Published by The Jakarta Post.

With a slightly lesser hit (2,541), “Indonesia” comes as the second biggest theme which incorporates “outbreak”, “virus” and “Chinese” as related concepts. One example of this theme is the quotation “It was only after Jokowi expressed his displeasure about the slow progress of repatriating 245 Indonesian nationals trapped in Chinese cities locked down because of the coronavirus that the ball started rolling, with the Indonesians finally arriving on Sunday”. This finding is rather self-explanatory because the core interest of the newspaper is Indonesia and how the nation is overcoming the challenges during the pandemic.

The next theme describes the government, where President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo as the national leader is listed as one of the concepts along with “risk”, “emergency” and “local”. The quotation for this theme includes “…the government did not appear to have a strategy to prevent ministerial blunders, and Jokowi seemed to still be observing his new ministers”. Interestingly, “government” emerged as the second most frequently used word with 688 counts. This clearly indicates the newspaper is heavily framing the role of the government in dealing with the current pandemic as the center of the crisis management process [12].

The subsequent themes indicate “pandemic”, “time”, “social” and “Jakarta”. The latest theme is also known as the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak in the country. Thus, it is expected that the newspaper will put more focus on the capital city than any other places in Indonesia. Meanwhile, the concepts under the theme of pandemic include “global”, “economic” and “crisis”. With over 1,300 hits, the theme has quotations such as “COVID-19 pandemic will contribute to the global economic slowdown, pushing down demand for imported vegetable oils”. This finding suggests that The Jakarta Post emphasizes the economic damages as direct consequences of the pandemic and a wider domino effect, which might hamper economic development.
The next important themes are “time” and “social”, both have nearly 1,000 hits. Concepts that belong to the earlier theme include “policy” and “support”, while the latter theme has “workers” and “distancing”. The public’s reaction towards social distancing advice has been key to some of the articles observed, with one example being “The social distancing called for by the President appears to be possible only for some white collar workers, given that as many as 74.1 million Indonesians work in the informal sector, further limiting their chances of working from home”. This highlights how difficult it is for the government to effectively contain the spread of the disease as most people need to leave their house to make a living.

The tensions further rose between the central and local governments over how to address the pandemic. One prime example is when Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan’s lockdown restricting intercity public transportation was canceled due to national government disapproval [13]. This crisis of communication has caused some public chaos and confusion. The President preferred to mention “large-scale social restrictions” rather than a partial or complete lockdown, although this term, in practice, implies a similar meaning. The competition between the two leaders has also been reflected in the media. Figure 3 displays how Jokowi and Anies are mentioned in the Jakarta Post, with the latter skyrocketing in popularity by early April.

The newspaper reports the central government seemed to be more concerned about the economic damages of lockdown policy, whilst local administrations were more into exercising their authority in preventing the spread within their respective areas. This lack of cohesiveness is not unique to Jakarta, as various regional heads in Indonesia are displaying their defiance of the President’s instructions by closing their borders, some even set to be closed for as long as four months.

The experience from Indonesia shows political elite competition is counterproductive. Ideally, the success of policy implementation relies heavily on the effective vertical policy coordination between the national government as the policy makers at the “top” and the local government as the implementers at the “bottom” [14]. In this case, ineffective vertical coordination between President Jokowi and local governments has become the source of shortfalls in COVID-19 policy responses and implementations. In short, the communication crisis across different institutional levels of government hampers policy effectiveness.

4. Conclusion
This paper has demonstrated how media in the global South setting is framing the current pandemic of COVID-19. Aside from health risks and events, the focus of the coverage has been on how the government is managing the crisis. The framing by The Jakarta Post re-emphasises the very nature of the Indonesian economy, which is heavily relying on the informal sector, thus, making the decision to
apply a full lockdown rather dilemmatic. The national-local political dynamics are also at play as it shapes the communication of crisis management in Indonesia.

Despite this useful insight, more works need to be done. Future research should consider comparing different media platforms and their approaches in framing the pandemic in Indonesia, to see whether they have significant differences in reporting the health crises. Also interesting to observe is the variety in the region, Southeast Asia.

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