

THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS OF THE REGIONAL OFFICE OF THE MINISTRY OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS OF NORTH SUMATRA IN DISSEMINATING ISLAMIC INFORMATION THROUGH ONLINE MEDIA

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Abstract : The development of information and communication technology has transformed patterns of interaction and ways of obtaining information, requiring government institutions to undergo digital transformation. This study aims to describe the communication strategy of the Public Relations Division of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of North Sumatra Province in disseminating public information through online media. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through observation and documentation of digital platforms managed by the office, such as the official website, Instagram, and Facebook. The findings reveal proactive, reactive, and collaborative communication strategies implemented across various digital platforms, including the development of the Pusaka application as a center for religious services. The use of online media has enhanced transparency, public participation, and institutional image. However, challenges such as low digital literacy among the public and the spread of hoaxes remain significant obstacles. Therefore, the Public Relations Division has developed educational content, strengthened collaboration with media outlets, and implemented digital literacy programs. These findings underscore the importance of professionalism and adaptability of government public relations in the digital communication era.

Keywords: Communication Strategy, Public Relations, Online Media

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Introduction

The advancement of information and communication technology has brought about significant changes in how people interact and access information. The internet and social media have become primary platforms for the public to obtain news and information quickly and easily. Government institutions, including vertical agencies such as the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kanwil Kemenag), are required to adapt to digital transformation in order to remain relevant and connected with the public (Nasrullah, 2015).

The Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of North Sumatra Province is a government institution with key responsibilities in managing religious affairs, religious education, and promoting religious moderation. To disseminate information related to policies, programs, and religious activities to the public, the role of public relations is essential. Public relations functions as a bridge between the institution and the public and serves as the front line in building institutional image and public trust (Effendy, 2006).

In response to the digital era, the Public Relations Division of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of North Sumatra has begun to optimize the use of online media such as the official website, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. This is done in response to the growing demand for public information and in an effort to enhance transparency, accountability, and public participation. Online media is also considered more effective due to its ability to reach broad audiences in real-time (Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, 2020).

Social media has become a universal platform widely used for sharing, interacting, educating, and various other purposes (Nurhanifah, 2021). However, the use of social media for information dissemination presents its own challenges. These include limited human resources with expertise in digital communication, low digital literacy among the public, and the potential spread of hoaxes or misleading religious information. Thus, a well-prepared and adaptive communication strategy from the public relations division is crucial to address these challenges.

The Concept of Government Public Relations

This concept refers to communication activities carried out by government institutions in order to build positive relationships with the public. Government public relations is tasked with conveying policy information, programs, and public services transparently and accountably. Its main goal is to foster mutual understanding, trust, and public support for the execution of government duties and functions. Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006) explain that public relations in organizations, including governmental bodies, is a strategic effort to manage communication with the public to form a positive and harmonious image.

In practice, government public relations not only functions as a one-way message disseminator but also as a facilitator of two-way communication between the government and society. This function is increasingly vital in an era of open information and heightened public participation. Public relations is responsible for responding to aspirations, criticisms, and issues that arise in society swiftly and appropriately. Therefore, government public relations personnel must be competent in strategic communication, media utilization, and relationship management with various stakeholders.

Communication strategy in public relations is the process of planning and executing communication efforts to effectively convey messages to the target audience. In the context of public relations, this includes media selection, message formulation, timing, and audience analysis. According to Cangara (2011), a communication strategy consists of tactical steps to achieve communication objectives while considering the social and cultural context of the audience. An appropriate strategy helps institutions, including

government bodies, shape positive public opinion, increase engagement, and consistently maintain institutional image.

In the practice of government public relations, communication strategies are typically categorized into three main types: proactive, reactive, and collaborative. Proactive strategies involve routine and structured information dissemination, such as through social media or press releases. Reactive strategies are used to address emerging issues or crises in society or the media. Collaborative strategies are carried out through partnerships with external parties such as mass media, community leaders, or local organizations. The choice of strategy must be adapted to the situation, audience characteristics, and the communication objectives to be achieved (Ruslan, 2010). With proper management, communication strategies in public relations can foster productive two-way relationships between the government and the public.

Online media has become a primary tool in disseminating public information in the digital age. The presence of digital platforms such as websites, news portals, and social media (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) allows information to be delivered quickly, broadly, and interactively. According to Nasrullah (2015), online media not only serves as a communication space but also a platform for social participation that can shape public opinion. For government institutions, online media provides an opportunity to enhance transparency, increase access to public services, and foster closer connections with society through informative and communicative content.

In addition to its advantages in speed and reach, online media also facilitates two-way communication between institutions and the public. The government can convey information directly, while citizens can respond, comment, and even criticize openly. This creates a more dynamic and responsive relationship. According to the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology of Indonesia (2020), well-managed online media can strengthen a positive institutional image, manage information crises, and build public engagement in government policies and programs. Therefore, utilizing online media by agencies such as the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs is a strategic step in modern and efficient public communication.

Digital communication and media literacy are two key aspects in information dissemination in today's technological era, particularly for government institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Digital communication allows for fast, interactive, and wide-reaching message delivery via platforms such as social media, websites, and digital applications. However, the success of this communication largely depends on the public's level of media literacy. Media literacy encompasses not only technical abilities to use digital tools but also critical thinking skills to filter, understand, and evaluate the information received. According to Livingstone (2004), media literacy is a crucial foundation for developing a smart society that is not easily influenced by hoaxes or misleading information. Hence, public relations personnel are not only responsible for disseminating information but also play an active role in raising public awareness and understanding of the digital content they consume.

Public relations challenges in the digital era have become increasingly complex with the rapid development of information technology and social media. Government institution public relations divisions, including the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, are not only expected to communicate quickly and transparently, but also manage the fast flow of information, combat the spread of hoaxes, and maintain institutional image amid real-time public opinion formation. According to the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology of Indonesia (2020), the main challenges in digital public relations include low digital literacy among the public, the rapid virality of negative issues, and the need for communication responses that are fast, accurate, and measurable. To address these challenges, public relations personnel must be adaptive, technologically literate, and capable of implementing data-driven and situationally responsive communication strategies.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method aimed at providing an in-depth overview of the communication strategies used by the Public Relations Division of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of North Sumatra Province in disseminating information through online media. This approach was chosen because the focus of the study is to understand the processes, meanings, and strategies implemented by public relations, rather than to measure or test hypotheses statistically. According to Moleong (2017), the qualitative approach aims to understand phenomena in a natural context by describing the data obtained through observation and documentation.

The data collection techniques in this study were conducted through direct observation of the online media platforms used by the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of North Sumatra, such as the official website, Instagram, and Facebook, as well as documentation in the form of activity news archives, announcements, and social media posts. The data were analyzed using content analysis by identifying patterns, themes, and communication strategies that emerged from the online media content. The analysis was carried out in three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, as described by Miles and Huberman (1994). Through this approach, it is expected that a comprehensive understanding can be obtained regarding how the public relations division of the Ministry's regional office builds effective digital communication with the public.

The data sources in this study were obtained from documentation, articles, the official website (<https://sumut.kemenag.go.id>), and media publications that reported on the activities of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of North Sumatra. The data collection techniques included direct observation of the office's social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, and documentation studies in the form of activity news, announcements, and digital archives from online media and the official site. The collected data were analyzed using content analysis and data reduction methods, by categorizing relevant information according to the research theme. The analysis steps were carried out through the processes of data collection, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, based on the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles & Huberman (1994).

Results and Discussion

Public Relations Strategy of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of North Sumatra through Online Media

The Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of North Sumatra Province has implemented a public relations strategy based on online media to enhance information transparency and public service delivery. One of its key initiatives is the development of the Pusaka Application (Pusat Layanan Keagamaan or Center for Religious Services), which integrates various services of the Ministry into a single digital platform. This application allows the public to conveniently and efficiently access information related to religious practices, religious education, religious data, and halal services.



Figure 1: Head of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of North Sumatra Launches Stakeholder Engagement Activity through the Pusaka Application (Medan Pos Online)

In addition, the Regional Office regularly conducts Media Gathering events with relevant and current themes such as “Anti-Bullying in Religious Educational Institutions.” These activities aim to strengthen relationships with mass media outlets and foster mutual understanding regarding critical issues in the field of religious education.



Figure 2: Ministry of Religious Affairs of North Sumatra Organizes Media Gathering on Anti-Bullying in Religious Educational Institutions

These public relations efforts have yielded positive outcomes, as evidenced by the office’s receipt of the 2024 Public Information Transparency Award from the North Sumatra Information Commission. This award signifies the commitment of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs to providing transparent and accountable information to the public.



Figure 3: Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of North Sumatra Receives the 2024 Public Information Transparency Award

Digital Communication and Media Literacy at the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of North Sumatra

The Regional Office has utilized digital communication as a key strategy in delivering public information and religious programs. Through social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, they disseminate content including official announcements, religious activities, religious moderation education, and other public services. These contents are tailored to reach diverse segments of society by considering the characteristics of each platform. For instance, on its Instagram account, the office frequently uploads infographics and short videos that are informative and engaging. These contents not only convey information but also encourage public participation in religious and social activities. Through this approach, the Regional Office has successfully established two-way communication with the public, enhanced transparency, and strengthened the institution’s positive image.

However, the success of digital communication also heavily relies on the level of media literacy within the community. The office recognizes that segments of the population still lack the ability to critically assess and interpret information. Therefore, in various social media posts and offline activities such as outreach programs and media gatherings, the Public Relations Division incorporates educational messages emphasizing the importance of verifying information, avoiding hoaxes, and using digital media responsibly. This initiative aligns with the principles of media literacy, which emphasize individuals' ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages across different forms of media (Livingstone, 2004). Hence, the Regional Office serves not only as an information provider but also as an agent for raising public awareness of the importance of media literacy.

Challenges and Efforts in Utilizing Online Media by the Regional Office

The Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of North Sumatra faces several challenges in leveraging online media for public service delivery. One of the main challenges is the limited digital literacy among the public, which may hinder the effective use of digital services such as the Pusaka application and the integrated WhatsApp-based One-Stop Service (PTSP) system. Moreover, the rapid dissemination of information in the digital era demands fast and accurate responses from the office to prevent the spread of hoaxes particularly regarding sensitive information such as hajj and umrah services.

Efforts to Address the Challenges

To overcome these challenges, the office launched the Pusaka Application, a digital platform that integrates various services of the Ministry, enabling the public to access religious information anytime and anywhere. In addition, the Smart Digital Class Program in madrasahs aims to improve digital literacy among students and educators, ensuring that they are equipped with the necessary competencies to thrive in the digital age.

Collaboration with Media

The Regional Office has also established partnerships with online media through visits and discussions with the Online Media Association (IMO) of North Sumatra Province. This collaboration aims to strengthen synergy in the dissemination of religious information in an accurate and timely manner to the public, while also improving transparency and accountability in public service delivery.

Conclusion

Government public relations plays a highly strategic role in fostering positive relationships between state institutions and the public. The Public Relations Division of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of North Sumatra Province not only carries out one-way communication functions but also develops two-way communication through various digital platforms. This approach aligns with the concept of Government Public Relations, as described by Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006), which views public relations as a strategic process to build public trust, shape a positive image, and increase community participation in government policies and programs. The communication strategies implemented by the office include proactive, reactive, and collaborative approaches executed through social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as digital innovations like the Pusaka application. By utilizing online media as a means of public information dissemination, the institution is able to reach a broad audience quickly and interactively.

The public relations team is also active in fostering partnerships with local and national media through media gathering events and by enhancing public digital literacy through outreach and educational programs, thereby reinforcing the institution's image as an informative and transparent agency. However, challenges such as low levels of media literacy among the public, the spread of hoaxes, and the rapid pace of digital information remain obstacles to effective communication. To address these issues, the office has taken strategic steps, including launching an integrated application, strengthening educational

content on social media, and actively collaborating with online media communities. These efforts demonstrate that public relations in the digital era must be conducted in a professional, measurable, and adaptive manner in response to technological developments and the evolving information needs of society.

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