

THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN PROMOTING TRANSPARENCY OF HAJJ FUNDS: A PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGY ANALYSIS OF THE MINISTRY OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS IN CONSTRUCTING PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

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Abstract : This study explores the media relations strategies employed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in managing the transparency of public information related to Hajj funds. In the context of increasing demands for openness highlighted by recent audit findings from the Supreme Audit Agency (BPK), which revealed weaknesses in the internal control system concerning the management of Hajj funds amounting to IDR 613.51 billion public communication has become a crucial aspect in maintaining public trust. The objective of this research is to analyze the Ministry's strategic public relations approaches in disseminating Hajj financial information effectively and accountably through various media channels. Using a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method, data were collected through literature review, documentation, and scholarly sources. The findings indicate that the Ministry of Religious Affairs has adopted a multichannel communication strategy integrating conventional media, social media, and digital platforms to address the growing demand for public transparency. This strategy also marks a shift from reactive to proactive communication in response to issues such as adjustments in the Hajj Pilgrimage Operational Costs (BPIH). The study further reveals that media serve a strategic role as partners in disseminating transparent and educational information. However, key challenges remain, including the complexity of financial information, low levels of digital literacy, and the spread of inaccurate information via social media. As a solution, this study proposes an integrated communication model based on five key elements: proactive communication, two-way digital interaction, strategic media partnerships, community education, and feedback systems. Through an interpretive approach, the research provides both theoretical and practical contributions to the enhancement of government public communication, particularly on sensitive issues such as the management of Hajj funds, which involves broad public trust and interest.

Keywords: Transparency, Media Relations, Hajj Funds, Public Communication, Public Relations Strategy

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Introduction

Transparency in the management of Hajj funds is a fundamental pillar in establishing accountable and trustworthy governance. Amid growing public demands for open access to information, the administration of Hajj funds amounting to trillions of rupiahs is not merely an administrative matter, but also deeply tied to the trust of the Muslim community in the state. In Indonesia, as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Hajj funds carry interrelated spiritual, social, and political dimensions.

Significant changes in the landscape of public communication have necessitated the renewal of government communication strategies, particularly in the context of Hajj administration. Today's society lives within a digital media ecosystem that enables rapid, widespread, and interactive access to information. However, advancements in information technology also heighten the risk of misinformation, especially concerning sensitive issues such as the management of religious funds. In such circumstances, reactive communication approaches have proven insufficient in managing public perception. Therefore, a proactive, systematic, and multichannel public relations strategy is essential.

Government public communication has often fallen short of meeting the public's need for transparent and educational information. Public relations units within government institutions including the Ministry of Religious Affairs frequently remain confined to one-way communication patterns that tend to be overly formalistic. In the context of Hajj fund management, such an approach is inadequate, as the public demands clarity, detail, and tangible proof of accountability. Moreover, low levels of financial and digital literacy among certain segments of society pose additional challenges in conveying complex information in ways that are accessible and easily understood.

Recent data indicate that the number of Hajj pilgrims continues to increase, with Hajj funds under management reaching trillions of rupiahs. According to the Coordinating Ministry for Human Development and Cultural Affairs (Kemenko PMK, 2023), the number of Indonesian Hajj pilgrims reached 229,000 in 2023, making it the second-highest figure after 2019. As the authority responsible for organizing the Hajj, the Ministry of Religious Affairs must maintain a transparent system and effective public communication strategy, given the massive scale of both financial resources and the number of pilgrims involved.

Nevertheless, various issues related to Hajj fund management continue to emerge. According to the Summary of Audit Findings on the Financial Accountability of Hajj Implementation (PIH) for the First Semester of 2024, the Audit Board of Indonesia (BPK) found that efficiency savings totaling IDR 571.14 billion had not been deposited into the Hajj Fund account as of the end of the audit period. In addition, weaknesses and noncompliance in the Internal Control System (SPI) were identified, amounting to IDR 613.51 billion (BPK, 2024).

From a communication perspective, numerous findings indicate that government messages often fail to reach the public in a complete and comprehensible manner. This is due to several factors, including the use of overly technical language, the lack of two-way interaction, and the limited use of social media often restricted to one-way information dissemination. As the primary authority in organizing the Hajj, the Ministry of Religious Affairs needs to reformulate its media strategy to deliver messages that are more empathetic, interactive, and contextually relevant.

Mass media serves as a strategic communication channel between the government and the public concerning Hajj fund transparency. However, the effectiveness of information dissemination largely depends on the public relations strategies implemented by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. (Pandiangan and Ratnasari, 2023) emphasize that government public relations plays a crucial role in fostering information transparency to build public trust.

The pattern of public communication has shifted from a reliance on conventional media toward the increasing use of digital media. This aligns with the findings of Priyatna et al. (2020), who argue that the optimization of information technology by government institutions is a key factor in improving the quality of public communication. In other words, transparency is not only measured by the availability of open data, but also by the way information is communicated to the public.

According to research by Shintia Ira (Claudia and Sa'diyah El Adawiyah 2024), an appropriate public relations communication model is crucial for enhancing public literacy and understanding in the era of social media. In the management of Hajj funds, an effective communication model is essential for building public trust and maintaining institutional legitimacy. The historical public distrust toward Hajj fund management evident in several past cases highlights the importance of proactive communication and consistent transparency. To achieve this, a communication approach that is not only informative but also educational and persuasive is required. Moreover, the public relations strategies of the Ministry of Religious Affairs must be adapted in response to the ongoing changes in media and communication technologies. Social media, digital platforms, and other emerging media have transformed how people access and process information. This shift demands an integrated communication approach and a multichannel strategy.

In response to these conditions, the government through the Ministry of Religious Affairs has begun developing various digital communication initiatives. One such initiative is the implementation of a digital communication protocol for Hajj officers in Saudi Arabia, which includes the use of official hashtags and social media training. While these efforts are positive, their impact on public perception has not yet been fully measured through scientific research. This highlights a research gap: the lack of comprehensive academic studies evaluating the Ministry of Religious Affairs' media relations strategies in the context of Hajj fund transparency.

Studies on public communication have largely focused on technical and administrative aspects, with limited attention given to strategic media communication that is multichannel and adaptive. Yet, in the context of a public trust crisis, the ability of government institutions to construct strong and credible narratives heavily depends on the effectiveness of media relations. Furthermore, an interpretive communication approach must also be developed to better understand how government messages are received, interpreted, and perceived by diverse segments of society.

This study aims to analyze the public communication strategies employed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Kemenag) in managing the transparency of Hajj funds, as well as to identify the challenges and obstacles encountered in the communication process. In addition, the study seeks to explore the role of media in supporting transparency efforts and to examine whether more effective communication approaches can be implemented by the Ministry. Therefore, the main focus of this research is to understand how the Ministry builds transparent and

effective public communication regarding Hajj funds through various media channels, and to identify key elements necessary for improving the existing communication strategies.

Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using library research methods and is grounded in an interpretive paradigm. This approach was chosen because the primary focus of the study is on the meaning-making processes involved in the public communication strategies implemented by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in fostering Hajj fund transparency an issue that is highly contextual and requires an interpretive understanding of institutional documents, media narratives, and public message constructions. This aligns with Bungin's (2012) view that qualitative research aims to understand the meaning behind social phenomena, rather than merely explaining relationships between variables. This study does not involve field observations or direct interviews, as all data are collected from publicly available secondary sources. Accordingly, the study setting is non-field-based, with the analytical focus directed toward the public communication activities of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia during the period from 2021 to 2024.

Data triangulation was conducted by comparing information from three main sources: institutional documents, mass media publications, and scholarly articles. The purpose of this triangulation was to ensure the validity and consistency of the messages conveyed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in constructing the narrative around Hajj fund transparency. This technique refers to the principle of triangulation as explained by Sugiyono and Lestari (2021), who state that triangulation in qualitative research is useful for testing the validity of data through multiple sources. All data used in this study are secondary data. The inclusion criteria for secondary data were as follows: relevance to the topic of communication strategy and Hajj fund transparency; publication date between 2021 and 2024; sourced from credible and verifiable entities; and, in the case of digital content, originating from verified official government accounts.

This study is analyzed using an interpretive paradigm, which views reality as a social construct shaped by interactions, perceptions, and narratives constructed by public institutions. This paradigm aligns with the perspective of Djamal (2015), who emphasizes that interpretive research aims to understand reality from the standpoint of the subjects involved in the communication process. In this context, the communication strategy of the Ministry of Religious Affairs is understood as an effort to shape public meaning and perception regarding the management of Hajj funds. Accordingly, the data analysis technique employed is qualitative thematic analysis, conducted in three stages: first, open coding to identify themes such as “transparency,” “media relations,” “proactive communication,” and “public response”; second, axial coding to connect these themes with the context of institutional communication and public perception; and third, selective coding to construct interpretive conclusions based on communication patterns and dominant narratives found in the data.

In the process of interpretation, the researcher positions themselves as a critical reader who seeks to understand not only what is communicated by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, but also how the message is constructed and why certain narratives are chosen particularly in the context of the sensitive issue of managing religious public funds. This approach also emphasizes that the understanding of public

communication cannot be separated from the social, political, and cultural contexts in which it takes place. Therefore, the findings of this study are not intended to produce generalizations, but rather to provide a deep understanding of government public communication practices in relation to strategic religious issues.

Results and Discussion

The public communication strategy of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in managing Hajj fund transparency reflects a shift from a reactive to a proactive approach. This shift is evident in the Ministry's efforts to construct a more open communication narrative through various information channels, including social media, official websites, and mass media publications. This transformation aligns with the core principles of crisis communication theory, which emphasize the importance of proactive communication in addressing situations that may lead to public distrust.

Preliminary findings indicate that the media relations strategy of the Ministry of Religious Affairs has evolved from a conventional approach to a multichannel approach that integrates digital, social, and traditional media. This model aligns with agenda-setting theory, wherein public institutions seek to shape public discourse by controlling both the message and the platforms of dissemination. A concrete example can be seen in the communication surrounding the adjustment of the Hajj Pilgrimage Operational Cost (BPIH), which was conveyed transparently through press conferences and official social media posts by the Ministry. The narrative employed not only presented numerical data but also provided social and policy context to help the public understand the rationale behind the cost changes.

Nonetheless, challenges persist, particularly in conveying technical financial information to a public that is diverse in terms of education and digital literacy. Highly technocratic information is often difficult for the general public to comprehend. According to the public sector communication model developed by Gregory and Willis (2013), the effectiveness of public communication depends on the simplification of messages without compromising substance, as well as the institution's ability to tailor narratives to the characteristics of its audience.

Media plays a strategic role in disseminating information and shaping public perception of the government. In this context, the Ministry of Religious Affairs' relationship with mass media forms part of its institutional public relations strategy aimed at building government trust. A study by Sentosa and Vanel (2024) indicates that consistent and credible media communication is a critical factor in constructing the image of a transparent government institution. The Ministry has conducted several media meetings, press briefings, and released official infographics to explain the processes and allocation of Hajj funds. This strategy demonstrates a clear orientation toward public engagement and reflects efforts to establish more participatory two-way communication.

Nevertheless, not all strategies have been implemented optimally. Kustiawan et al. (2023) note that a major barrier to public information services provided by the Ministry of Religious Affairs' public relations offices at the regional level is the low level of technical capacity and digital literacy among PR personnel. This affects both the quality of content and the frequency of publication. As a result, the messages delivered to the public tend to be inconsistent or fail to counter alternative narratives circulating on social media.

In such situations, the principles of crisis communication become essential. Coombs (2007) explains that in the face of a potential public trust crisis, institutions must deliver information promptly, clearly, and empathetically—acknowledging the problem and demonstrating the corrective measures being undertaken. For instance, when the Audit Board of Indonesia (BPK) released its findings regarding IDR 571.14 billion in efficiency funds that had not yet been deposited, public response could be negative in the absence of a convincing explanatory narrative from the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

To address these challenges, the author proposes an integrated communication model consisting of five key elements: (1) proactive communication through regular publications; (2) the use of social media for two-way interaction; (3) strategic partnerships with mass media; (4) public education based on religious community groups such as *majelis taklim*; and (5) a digital feedback system such as polling or online Q&A sessions. This model aligns with the framework of modern government communication, which emphasizes openness, participation, and information technology as the foundation for managing public information.

Moreover, it is essential for the Ministry of Religious Affairs to adopt a communication approach that is not only informative, but also educational and persuasive. In the context of managing religiously sensitive public funds, institutional legitimacy is heavily influenced by public perceptions of honesty, fairness, and competence. Therefore, public communication strategies must be designed to bridge the gap between technical data and the public's need for accessible and easily understood information.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that the media relations strategy of the Ministry of Religious Affairs has shifted toward a more open and responsive communication pattern. However, further theoretical and technical strengthening is needed in the implementation of this communication strategy to adequately address the complexity of Hajj financial management and the growing public demand for transparency.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the media relations strategy of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in managing Hajj fund transparency has undergone significant changes, particularly in response to public demands for accountability in the management of religious funds. The use of digital media, regular publications, and direct interaction through social media indicates a shift from a reactive to a proactive communication approach. The implementation of a multichannel strategy integrating digital, conventional, and social media has enabled the Ministry to reach a broader and more diverse audience, making information more transparent and publicly accessible. However, challenges remain, particularly regarding the public's ability to comprehend financial information digitally, the inherent complexity of financial data, and the risk of disinformation on social media platforms. Public relations plays a crucial role in maintaining institutional credibility, while media serves as a strategic partner in promoting information openness. To ensure that financial information related to the Hajj is both understood and trusted by the public, an integrated and sustainable communication model is essential. Therefore, effective public communication is not merely about delivering information, but about establishing methods to build lasting public trust. The Ministry's public relations strategy must continue to adapt to the

evolving landscape of communication technologies and the increasing public demand for transparency in Hajj financial governance.

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