The Role of Spokesperson during The Covid-19 Pandemic in East Nusa Tenggara Province

Fian S. Kotten[1], Ferly Tanggu Hana[2], Silvania S.E.Mandaru[3]

[1,2,3] Nusa Cendana University, Kupang-NTT, Indonesia

Abstract. The crisis that was caused by a non-natural disaster, Covid-19, has made many local governments take over public communication in order to deliver accurate information about the disease to the community. East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) provincial government was one of the local governments that delivered the Covid-19 pandemic information through the spokesperson of the Covid-19 task force team. The spokesperson was the Head of the Leadership Administration Bureau and the Regional Secretariat of NTT Province and also represent The Covid-19 task force team. Furthermore, as a public communicator for NTT Provincial Government during the pandemic, he has played an extremely important role in communicating information from the provincial government to its community. The purpose of this research was to describe the role of the Covid-19 spokesman as a public communicator of NTT Province during the Covid-19 pandemic. This was qualitative research with a case study method. The informants were chosen based on purposive technique sampling. The study findings showed that NTT spokesman for Covid-19 played a role as the provider and information gatherer; arranger for media tools and systems that can extend the pandemic information for the society, and; a government representative of the NTT Province. These findings contribute to the communication literature by providing context for government public communicators related to Covid-19

Keywords: *Spokesperson; Covid-19; Pandemic; Public Communicator; NTT Province*

1. Introduction

In social life, communication can occur anywhere and anytime (Hardiyansyah, 2015, p. 12). This makes communication a ubiquitous process. One of the scopes of studies related to this is public communication. Panuju (2018, p. 86) explains that public communication can be done for various topics such as politics, society, economics, culture, and others. The thing that needs to be a concern is that anyone who conducts public communication must have the competence and skills as a public communicator. Choosing spokespersons with scientific credibility and training them to be effective communicators could be critical in slowing down the spread of infection. People will be more likely to adhere to public health guidelines if they deem the speaker trustworthy and charismatic, and qualified (Capurro et al., 2022). The figure of a public communicator according to Hardiyansyah (2015, p. 24) can be interpreted as a person from the bureaucracy who conveys messages and serves the needs

of the community as citizens according to the basic rules and established procedures. Public communicators include public relations staff, spokespersons, extension workers, broadcasters, and the Master of Ceremony (MC). In special fields such as public services, public figures such as officials are perceived to have a high level of public trust to listen to their communications. According to Abu-Akel et al. (2021), expert, government and celebrities in sequence were the three most effective spokespersons for public health messaging. They were mainly needed when the messages should be delivered under the uncertain conditions of a pandemic. If the messages are related to a decision then the government will be suitable to share the messages compared to the other spokespersons.

Public communication run by government officials is part of service efforts in terms of public information. Public communication by the apparatus can be seen when the government faces a problem or a crisis, including in a disaster situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Brown and White's in Cutlip et al. (2006), the best crisis strategy is to maintain good relations. There are times when a crisis can come so quickly because of its unpredictable nature, such as a disaster situation.

Susanto (2011) states that real disaster management does not rely solely on the ability to provide material assistance, but also provides moral support. This context functions as a social radar for communication to transmit information to various parties in a disaster situation. So, disaster communication is the process of producing messages or information about disasters, distributing and receiving messages from the pre-disaster stage, during a disaster, and after a disaster (Lestari, 2018). One of the parties that play a significant role in managing the Covid-19 pandemic crisis is the government. For the province of NTT, the government's role is carried out by a spokesman for the Task Force for the Acceleration of Handling Covid-19, who is also the Head of the Administrative Bureau of Leadership and the Regional Secretariat of the NTT Province.

In accordance with the description above, this study aims to determine the role of public spokespersons during the Covid-19 pandemic by using action assembly theory as a theoretical study. John Greene in Morissan (2013) as the developer of this theory, suggests that people manage knowledge in the mind and use it to create messages. According to this theory, there are two forms of knowledge, namely content knowledge and procedural knowledge. In content knowledge, humans know about something. Then in procedural knowledge, humans know how to do something.

2. Method

This research is a type of qualitative research, namely research where the discovery procedure is carried out without using statistical or quantification procedures (Strauss and Corbin in Salim and Syahrum (2012). The method used is a case study. The study of data sources in the case study method can be taken from various aspects, such as individuals, groups, programs, and organizations that experienced certain events. The authors used an individual who was the spokesperson for the NTT Province Covid-19 handling acceleration Task Force, as the source of data in this case study. Data collection techniques are in-depth interviews and documentation. Interviews were conducted using a purposive sampling technique with the Head of the Administrative Bureau of Leadership and the Regional Secretariat of the NTT Province as the spokesperson for Covid-19, the Head of the Materials and Communications Section for the NTT Provincial Leadership, communication academics, and the public. The data analysis technique used was the technique according to Miles and

Huberman (1994), which includes data reduction, presentation, and conclusion.

3. Result and Discussion

Table 1. Informant Profile

Name	Status
Marius Ardu Jelamu	– Spokesperson for the Task Force for the Acceleration of Handling Covid-19 in NTT Province – Head of the Administrative Bureau of Leadership and the Regional Secretariat of the Province of NTT
Diani T.A.Ledo	Head of Materials and Leadership Communications Section, East Nusa Tenggara Province.
Veki Edizon Tuhana	Lecturer of the Communication Science Department, Nusa Cendana University.
Maria Paskalia Owa	A Community member.
Setni Yumina Polly	A Community member.

The spokesperson for the Covid-19 NTT Province stated that carrying out his duties as a public communicator in this pandemic situation was also complemented by Covid-19 data either from the district/city scope or nationally and even internationally. The following is an excerpt from an interview with Jelamu regarding the context of the data it holds as knowledge to be passed on to the public.

"In addition to the data prepared by the Health Service which has been collected from districts/cities, I also complete it with national data, such as the development of national Covid, and the development of Covid internationally. So when we explain something, we don't only explain in the context of East Nusa Tenggara, but also how it is connected with other regions, what about the center, what about international developments, how national developments are". (Interview with Jelamu, October 8, 2021)"

The lecturer who became an expert informant, Tuhana, stated that the information content for public knowledge in disaster communication should not only be about data. Tuhana, who is a Lecturer in the Communication Science Department of Nusa Cendana University, refers to the necessity of a spokesperson to fulfill the 5W+1H elements which are the complete formula for effective communication.

"Actually, if the simplest effective communication is the first one, it must be able to contain journalistic elements, especially 5W+1H. So 5W+1H is a mandatory requirement to convey information to the public regarding Covid-19 information. If the question is effective communication, I don't think it's complete, it's not yet optimal in conveying information. Especially with regard to, for example, questions about 'why' and 'how'. So overall the information conveyed is only in the form of 'what', 'who'. So if overall the spokesperson only talks about 'what', 'who', and 'where'. But when it comes to digging into detailed information, why it happened, then what causes it, how it can happen, how to deal with it, then how we can adapt

to this Covid, and so on, it's not really the whole thing. (Interview with Tuhana, October 14, 2021)"

When asked to name specific sources that became the basis for the knowledge of the NTT Covid-19 spokesperson, it was found that Jelamu was also actively monitoring the broadcasting of international media. In full, the authors describe the findings in the following interview:

"As I mentioned previously, I usually follow all developments of the world's Covid. Through television, through all media, and so on. I don't just watch Indonesian TV, I always watch CNN, I always watch Al Jazeera. I always watch foreign TV and foreign media. Following the press releases from the WHO and so on, read literature on The Covid, literature on health, then on viruses, about vaccinations of all kinds, read literature. (Interview with Jelamu, October 8, 2021)"

Additionally, Jelamu does not forget to refer to national sources. Specifically, according to him, these sources come from the policies of the central government and relevant related institutions.

"Those are all references, in addition to attending webinars with the central government, meetings related to handling Covid, then following the guidelines from the central government through decrees, the Minister of Home Affairs, the Minister of Health, Presidential Decrees of all kinds, all of them," he said. laws and regulations, Governor's Decree, Governor's Regulation and so on must be properly controlled". (Interview with Jelamu, October 8, 2021)

According to Jelamu, his efforts through the strategy of preparing media devices have been carried out. His affirmation was seen in the findings of the interview which spoke about the staff of the NTT Leadership Administration Bureau and the NTT Secretariat (formerly known as the Public Relations and Protocol Bureau) that had been mobilized for all media equipment readiness.

"I prepared media tools and mobilized all my staff in the Public Relations and Protocol Department. Yes. They are the ones who set up the tools and communication with the media. So when we make press statements directly on Facebook, on television, and so on. My staff has set all that up, set up all the equipment, invited journalists, and then set up the equipment for the live broadcast and so on. (Interview with Jelamu, October 8, 2021)"

In addition to preparing media tools, Diani Ledo, who directly assisted the spokesperson, added the importance of the participation of other parties to help package messages to be conveyed to the public. These parties include religious, educational, and traditional leaders.

"This information has arrived, and the people in the village community are actually religious leaders, traditional leaders, and educational leaders. If they talk, people listen. (Interview with Ledo, October 5, 2021)"

Meanwhile, Ledo said that the Leadership Administration Bureau and the NTT Secretariat itself had used channels that could extend information from spokespersons to the government at the district/city level.

"Nevertheless, we use channels that can extend the information through the district/city government. So, the press releases or press conferences that we make where the head of the bureau as the spokesperson for Covid conveys information will be followed up by the regional government. Quotation marks are effective, not optimal. It's okay. But it is efficient and effective in the sense that we go through the path to convey it to the local government and local governments are expected to extend the information to the people in their respective areas. Yes, so this work is actually a big job, it is not enough for us, the provincial government, to do it without the district/city government which actually has a large area. So if you say very effectively, no. (Interview with Ledo, October 5, 2021)"

Jelamu confirmed the same thing that there are channels to be used to expand information regarding Covid-19, including communicants who heard information and then could become communicators for those who have not listened to information.

"Look, in communication science, you are a communicator, message, communicant. The spokesperson (communicator), then conveys the message (message), to whom, the communicant receives. But they can later become communicators of one, two, three more, and so on. (Interview with Jelamu, October 8, 2021)"

In the midst of incessant efforts to deliver messages from the government about Covid-19, it turns out that not all people show trust in these messages. This is because many people are bored and do not believe in information and clarification of the Covid-19 news circulating in the community. Maria Paskalia Owa, one of the community members, commented that many clarifications from a spokesperson can lead to public distrust again.

"So, according to me, maybe the information they provide to the public needs to be filtered again because there was misleading information. Then there will be another clarification. Most of the time, right, if they receive the information that has been released first, they will be more convinced. So, when there was another clarification, they said, uh, this must be crazy. So, it was an unsure time, people's trust in what they (the government) said is starting to decrease. People are losing their trust. (Interview with Owa, 18 October 2021)"

The results of the interview with Jelamu provide an illustration of how he responds to issues that require an explanation from the government. This spokesman chose not to follow the wild rumors that have not been confirmed. Therefore, as a spokesperson, he must clarify the news. His statement regarding this matter is conveyed in the following interview results:

"Even though one million people say A is wrong, if it turns out to be not true, it must be refuted. So it's not that many people say this, no, but the truth, the fact, that objectivity must be prioritized. Those wild issues must be straightened out, confirmed, clarified, and so on, and that is often done by us as spokespersons. Therefore, once again what needs to be emphasized is objectivity, it is important. A public communicator must be objective, objectivity must be correct, must be according to data, according to facts, and so on, and he must not be influenced by issues other than that, let alone wild issues that are not true. (Interview with Jelamu, October 8, 2021)"

Setni Yumina Polly, one of the informants from the community, showed her appreciation for the government's communication performance through the Covid-19

spokesperson. According to her, the government seems alert and responsible for conveying the right information to the public as a form of the government's seriousness in convincing the public that the communication made by the spokesperson is considered effective.

> "*Yes, so far the communication for the spokesperson for the Covid-19 Task Force has been quite effective. Because in conveying information from the central government and regional governments through the Covid-19 spokesperson to the public, it was conveyed that the government was really serious, ready, and capable of dealing with Covid-19 and it was hoped that the public should remain calm and alert and not afraid but believe that Covid-19 can be cured.* (Interview with Polly, October 25, 2021)"

Personally, Jelamu showed that as a public communicator he must be alert when speaking in front of the public and think quickly to clarify all the information needed by the NTT community regarding the development of Covid-19. Jelamu's answer is captured in the following quote:

> "*The job of a public communicator is a very, very broad job, which means extraordinary knowledge is needed. Especially when you do direct interviews with radio, and television journalists, you don't have time to think, because that's all that comes out of your head, you must already have scientific references.* (Interview with Jelamu, October 8, 2021)"

His seriousness in actualizing his capacity as a representative of the NTT Provincial Government is evident in Jelamu's explanation regarding the technical supervision that needs to be carried out regarding the Covid-19 issue. Jelamu detailing the policies that he conveys as information or knowledge is not enough just as a guideline but needs to be implemented in the form of real procedures.

> "*Therefore, technical supervision is needed, not only policy supervision but technical supervision. How are vaccinations, how are* health *protocols, how are treatments, how to regulate human traffic between regions, and so on, so everything. How the procedures for information on ships, between land terminals, then on airplanes, and so on are many things.* (Interview with Jelamu, October 8, 2021)"

Based on the results, there are three roles carried out by the Spokesperson of the Covid-19 Task Force in NTT Province as follows:

Role of Spokesperson for the NTT Covid-19 Task Force as Information Provider and Gatherer

The role of public spokespersons as providers and collectors of information has been well recognized by the spokesperson for the Covid-19 of NTT Province. This cognitive memory is totally realized as part of the content knowledge that a spokesperson for Covid-19 must understand as the essence of the substance that will be conveyed to the public, especially with his position as a government representative during the Covid-19 pandemic. Kongtieng et al. (2019) pointed out that a spokesman`s credibility during a crisis relates to audiences' perceptions of organizational reputation. As the spokesperson of NTT Covid-19 task force represents the government, the information will also be credible for the public

compared to the other sources.

In addition to content knowledge, procedural knowledge is also perceived in the findings of this study. As a spokesperson, the skill and ability to communicate crisis situations can be seen in the way the spokesperson portrays relevant references about Covid-19 that are needed and need to be conveyed to the public. Sultan and Rapi (2020) found out that the Indonesian government through the spokesperson for Covid-19 uses discursive strategies to raise the spirit of collectivism. Collectivism is built on the use of parallelism, such as synergy, integration, unity, and togetherness that aim to awaken the spirit of collectivism. On the other hand, as a comparison, during Covid -19 crisis in China, the government worked hard on constructing the national image through a spokesperson. According to research by Liu et al. (2022), the analysis of meanings and contexts of attitude markers is targeted at and useful for the generalization of a national image. National images of China generalized from attitude markers include peace-loving, cooperative, responsible, dependable, powerful, honest, open, effective, and contributive. By forming these images, the spokespersons aim to show that China is responsible for its people's lives and is also taking responsibility as a major country to help the world with public health security. Another example of the role of spokesperson which considers the best in the world during Covid-19 was from The New Zealand government (Beattie & Priestley, 2021). The key success of New Zealand`s Spokesperson in their daily briefings was they established trust with their audience through open and honest communications, inspired and motivated audiences, and established and maintained a duty of care relationship through inclusive and empathetic communications. Meanwhile, the Indonesian government including NTT`s government mostly delivered new data when communicating with the audiences.

The material that was about to be presented to the NTT public was information collected by means of listening to national and international media reports, following central government instructions through webinars or central policies, and engaging in communication forums for Covid-19 spokespersons across all provinces in Indonesia. In fact, most of the information from these various sources was only in the form of delivering general information to the public, not answering the journalistic side of information that is needed by the community, namely the 5W+1H concept (what, who, why, where, when, How).

The Role of Spokesperson for the NTT Covid-19 Task Force in Preparing Media Devices and Public Information Channels

Boos, Koolstra and Willems in Susanto (2011) revealed that exposure to mass media can influence public opinion on certain issues, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Media management is essential whether for crisis or risk communication because information production and dissemination should consider crisis preparation, crisis response, and even crisis recovery (Lilleker et al., 2021). Information about the Covid-19 pandemic has also attracted media attention. In NTT Province, which at that time had quite a number of positive cases of Covid-19, the public's demand for public information was even higher. Traditionally, mass media have operated as a bridge between governmental actors communicating about the crisis and their public. When media play a supportive role, the impact is positive for the outcome of the crisis (Lilleker et al., 2021).

The role of the NTT Covid-19 spokesperson in this section can be seen in several procedural actions flow intending to disseminate messages (information). These action steps include the use of social media such as Facebook, preparing sign language interpreters,

providing competent figures, and using other channels that are used as a medium for transmitting information such as district/city government and public figures. These whole options should be utilized by the government because of, as argued by Fullerton et al. (2022), the importance of building and maintaining trust in government, especially during a pandemic when everyone is experiencing the same unknown and is seeking reliable and trustworthy information.

In terms of spreading information about the Covid-19 pandemic, NTT's wide geographical location becomes an obstacle. To reduce the information gap, the procedural path of passing information through key communicators in stages at the regional level is also carried out by the Covid-19 task force team.

Role of Spokesperson for the NTT Covid-19 Task Force as Representative of the NTT Government

As a spokesperson, this role is also as a representative of the government to convey accurate information to the public amidst the onslaught of hoax news surrounding Covid-19. Compared to similar research conducted in Portuguese, it was quite common that not the holder of the Ministry of Health to take over communication with the country (Araújo et al., 2021). In this case, it was also applied in local government in Indonesia where the messages about Covid-19 were delivered by a spokesperson from a member of the task force that might never deal with health background. The roles of government representatives are: to represent the NTT Government, provide objective facts about Covid-19, persuasively convince the public, and represent the NTT Government in conducting surveillance. Based on research conducted by Abu-Akel et al. (2021a), it was found that evidence suggesting that the government official was more effective than the celebrity spokesperson in communicating recommended preventive health behavior. Furthermore, the result also showed that the effect is stronger among older respondents, the most vulnerable people during Covid-19 Pandemic. This means the spokesman of government officials has played a significant role when facing a crisis by disseminating credible information to the public.

Compared to the research conducted by (Rifandi & Irwansyah, 2021), this research is similar because public spokespersons must be able to master rhetorical techniques in order to perform their roles well. Another study conducted by Cahyati et al. (2021) confirms that the variability of the media in the delivery of Covid-19 information from the government will make it easier for the public to access information. Diverse media is an important option in disseminating information, especially in areas with diverse geographic locations, such as in NTT. In this study, the main media used by the NTT Covid-19 spokesperson was Facebook, even though the internet network was not evenly distributed throughout the NTT area.

In addition to the findings on the role of spokespersons, it can be found that other media devices such as government websites are one of the media that have not been utilized optimally to disseminate official information from the government to its society, including information about Covid-19.

4. Conclusion

Based on the findings in this study, the spokesperson for the NTT Covid-19 Task Force has accomplished three roles during the Covid-19 pandemic. First, the role as a provider and collector of information; Second, the role in setting up media tools and

channels that can extend information; Third, the role as a representative of the NTT government. In running all these roles, the spokesperson must have mastery of the message conveyed, both in the form of knowledge and action procedures that were very worthwhile in communicating public information about Covid-19.

Acknowledgements

Notes on contributors

Fian S. Kotten, Department of Communication Science, Nusa Cendana University, Kupang-NTT, Indonesia,

Ferly Tanggu Hana, Department of Communication Science, The Nusa Cendana University, Kupang-NTT, Indonesia,
Email: ferlythana@staf.undana.ac.id,
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7377-745X

Silvania S.E. Mandaru, Department of Communication Science, Nusa Cendana University, Kupang-NTT, Indonesia

Reference

Abu-Akel, A., Spitz, A., & West, R. (2021a). The effect of spokesperson attribution on public health message sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic. *PLOS ONE*, *16*(2), e0245100. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0245100

Abu-Akel, A., Spitz, A., & West, R. (2021b). Who is listening? Spokesperson effect on communicating social and physical distancing measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.564434

Araújo, R., Lopes, F., & Magalhães, O. (2021). COVID-19: Uma pandemia gerida pelas fontes oficiais através de uma comunicação política. *Comunicação e Sociedade*, *40*, 17–32. https://doi.org/10.17231/comsoc.40(2021).3520

Beattie, A., & Priestley, R. (2021). Fighting COVID-19 with the team of 5 million: Aotearoa New Zealand government communication during the 2020 lockdown. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, *4*(1), 100209. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2021.100209

Cahyati, W., Rachman, R. S., Evert, D. P., Nugraha, I., & Dianti, D. (2021). Penggunaan media dalam komunikasi publik juru bicara pemerintah Republik Indonesia khusus COVID-19 dalam penyampaian pesan kepada masyarakat Indonesia. *Buana Komunikasi (Jurnal Penelitian Dan Studi Ilmu Komunikasi)*, *1*(2), 80. https://doi.org/10.32897/buanakomunikasi.2020.1.2.562

Capurro, G., Maier, R., Tustin, J., Jardine, C. G., & Driedger, S. M. (2022). The spokesperson matters: Evaluating the crisis communication styles of primary spokespersons when presenting COVID-19 modeling data across three jurisdictions in Canada. *Journal of Risk Research*, *25*(11–12), 1395–1412. https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2022.2128391

Cutlip, S. M., Center, A. H., & Broom, G. M. (2006). *Effective public relations* (11th ed.). Pearson College Division.

Fullerton, M. M., Benham, J., Graves, A., Fazel, S., Doucette, E. J., Oxoby, R. J., Mourali, M., Boucher, J.-C., Constantinescu, C., Parsons Leigh, J., Tang, T., Marshall, D. A., Hu, J., & Lang, R. (2022). Challenges and recommendations for COVID-19 public health messaging: A Canada-wide qualitative study using virtual focus groups. *BMJ Open*, *12*(4), e054635. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-054635

Hardiyansyah. (2015). *Komunikasi pelayanan publik: Konsep dan aplikasi*. Gava Media.

Kongtieng, S., Komolsevin, R., Punnahitanond, R., & Kesaprakorn, P. (2019). Effect of spokesperson types and the use of first person pronoun in crisis communication on food organization reputation and purchase intention. *Executive Journal* , *39*(2), 3–19.

Lestari, P. (2018). *Komunikasi bencana: Aspek penting pengurangan risiko bencana*. PT Kanisius.

Lilleker, D., Coman, I. A., Gregor, M., & Novelli, E. (2021). *Political communication and COVID-19: Governance and rhetoric in time of crisis*. Routledge.

Liu, Q. Y., Ang, L. H., Waheed, M., & Kasim, Z. B. M. (2022). Appraisal resources and national image: A case study on Chinese foreign ministry spokespersons' responses about COVID-19. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, *12*(10), 2152–2160. https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1210.23

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook, 2nd ed. In *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook, 2nd ed*. Sage Publications, Inc.

Morissan. (2013). *Teori komunikasi: Individu hingga massa* . Kencana.

Panuju, R. (2018). *Pengantar studi (Ilmu) komunikasi: Komunikasi sebagai kegiatan, komunikasi sebagai ilmu*. Prenadamedia Group.

Rifandi, D. A., & Irwansyah, I. (2021). Retorika juru bicara satgas COVID-19 di platform Youtube. *Jurnal Teknologi Dan Sistem Informasi Bisnis*, *3*(1), 64–77. https://doi.org/10.47233/jteksis.v3i1.185

Salim, & Syahrum. (2012). *Metodologi penelitian kualitatif (Qualitative research methodology)*. Citapustaka Media.

Sultan, S., & Rapi, M. (2020). Positive discourse analysis of the Indonesian government spokesperson's discursive strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. *GEMA Online®*

Journal of Language Studies, *20*(4), 251–272. https://doi.org/10.17576/gema-2020-2004-14

Susanto, E. H. (2011). *Komunikasi bencana (Disaster communication)*. Aspikom.