



Paracrisis, Misinformation, and Clarification: How Government Public Relations Tackle Fake Official Letters

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Abstract

This study examines how the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform managed a paracrisis triggered by misinformation on social media, specifically the spread of a fake official letter announcing the appointment of contract-based government employees as civil servants without proper assessment. It is the government ministry mandated to formulate and implement civil service policies, regulate recruitment and competency-based assessment, and oversee bureaucratic reform to ensure meritocracy and integrity within Indonesia's public administration system. This research is built upon a post-positivist paradigm with a single case study descriptive approach, employing a qualitative research design through in-depth interviews with public relations officers of the Ministry and an analysis of its social media posts. Results show that the response to address the consequences of the fake official letter echoes the corrective strategy posited in Coombs' misinformation paracrisis strategy. It is revealed that as authorities and budgets can affect misinformation paracrisis management, the knowledge of organizational products and policies will influence and accelerate the decision-making process to solve the crisis.

Keywords: paracrisis, misinformation, social media, public relations, SDG 16: Peace Justice and Strong Institutions

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Abstrak

Studi ini mengkaji bagaimana Kementerian Pendayagunaan Aparatur Negara dan Reformasi Birokrasi mengelola parakrisis yang dipicu oleh misinformasi di media sosial, khususnya penyebaran surat resmi palsu yang mengumumkan pengangkatan pegawai pemerintah dengan perjanjian kerja menjadi pegawai negeri sipil tanpa melalui asesmen yang semestinya. Kementerian ini merupakan lembaga pemerintah yang memiliki mandat untuk merumuskan dan melaksanakan kebijakan kepegawaian aparatur sipil negara, mengatur rekrutmen dan asesmen berbasis kompetensi, serta mengawasi reformasi birokrasi guna memastikan meritokrasi dan integritas dalam sistem administrasi publik di Indonesia. Penelitian ini dibangun berdasarkan paradigma post-positivisme dengan pendekatan studi kasus tunggal yang bersifat deskriptif, serta menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif melalui wawancara mendalam dengan pejabat humas kementerian dan analisis terhadap unggahan media sosial kementerian tersebut. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa respons dalam menangani konsekuensi surat resmi palsu tersebut merefleksikan strategi korektif sebagaimana dikemukakan dalam strategi parakrisis misinformasi Coombs. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa kewenangan dan anggaran dapat memengaruhi pengelolaan parakrisis misinformasi, sementara pengetahuan mengenai produk dan kebijakan organisasi turut memengaruhi serta mempercepat proses pengambilan keputusan dalam menyelesaikan krisis.

Kata kunci: parakrisis, misinformasi, media sosial, public relations, SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

Introduction

The topic of contract-based employees transitioning into State Civil Servants (SCS) highlights critical social and political dynamics in Indonesia. The position of Civil Servants, or 'SCS' in Indonesian, holds significant prestige, offering economic stability and a respected societal role. However, this transition has been contentious due to limited civil service positions and long-standing socio-political tensions. Contract-based employees face challenges in securing permanent positions, and this issue has become a widely debated topic in Indonesia. The presence of misinformation in Indonesia has added to these challenges, affecting public perception and government credibility. Critiques in recent literature and media have pointed to the Indonesian government's difficulties in countering misinformation effectively, often affecting its reputation and ability to maintain public trust.

Fake news and hoaxes spread on social media can cause the public to perceive false information as genuine and verified information, which can ultimately influence public opinion based on lies (Shu et al., 2020). The fight against hoaxes was initiated by the Indonesian government, involving both government and non-government organizations (Nurlatifah, 2019). Efforts to curb the spread of hoaxes on social media have become crucial given that social media is often the backbone of the implementation of digital government (Kartikawangi, 2020), particularly in times of crisis when public institutions may resort to technology to communicate with citizens (Ivanov, 2021). Most government agencies in Indonesia use social media to disseminate institutional information, encourage online public conversations and amplify official messages (Idris, 2018). Social media have therefore served as the basic connectivity that strengthens the implementation of digital government (Kartikawangi, 2020).

Despite the increasing number of studies on the roles of governments and public organizations during crisis situations (Cattapan et al., 2020; Ivanov et al., 2023), there is a dearth of research in the field of public relations that focuses on crisis management practices concerning misinformation on social media. As the pervasive use of social media in public relations may lead to potential future crises of misinformation (Coombs & Holladay, 2012), the efforts to protect the public from the risk of fake news and misinformation circulating on social media are a fundamental communication and social issue. This research aims to contribute to the body of research on online misinformation and crisis

communication management in government organizations. It aims to unpack the way the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform of the Republic of Indonesia identified and handled the fake letter crisis that once exploded on social media. These fake letters refer to official written documents that look similar to those issued by the government but are in fact counterfeited by other unidentified parties. The hoax case analyzed in this study is the crisis stemming from the inauguration of contract-based employees as State Civil Servants without tests, which was uncovered on WhatsApp on May 28, 2022 (Kementerian PANRB, 2022a).

WhatsApp is an instant messaging service that allows users to exchange various content, such as text, documents, videos, images, and voice messages (Astarilla & Warman, 2017). WhatsApp often operates as a paradox because it can encrypt private chats while still allowing its content to become viral, both of which can be misused to spread hoaxes (Freitas Melo et al., 2020). For instance, the vulnerability of the Indonesian users to hoaxes circulating on WhatsApp occurs partially due to the absence of a fact validation process (Syam et al., 2020). Therefore, people tend to gullibly trust the messages, especially when they are relayed by certain celebrities, public figures, experts, or institutions. In other words, they consider the messages trustworthy based on mere personal assumptions. This has given rise to the ease of spreading misinformation on the platform, among which is the dissemination of the fake official letters imitating those issued by governmental bodies (Aïmeur & Brassard, 2023).

These fake official letters normally have a header, letter number, and signature similar to the original letters issued by the government, including the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform, a ministry usually in charge of carrying out government affairs in the field of state apparatus and bureaucratic reform, including recruitment and appointment of civil servants. In the case explored in this study, the fake letters seem to suggest that the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform has appointed contract-based employees as civil servants without any official test, while in accordance with the rules, the appointment of State Civil Servants must go through a selection process, including official entry tests. This case of fake official letters can be categorized as a (para)crisis, defined as “a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior” (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 409), because it could ruin the reputation

of the Ministry and exacerbate the negative sentiment between contract-based employees and State Civil Servants which has been a longstanding issue in Indonesia. Such case is an instance of a misinformation crisis, which refers to a situation where false, misleading, or harmful information about an organization circulates on social media (Coombs, 2020). This research aims to explore how the Indonesian Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform carried out the paracrisis management of misinformation regarding the fake official letters on the appointment of the contract-based government employees as civil servants without any prior assessment.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding the Ministry's paracrisis strategy requires examining Indonesia's governmental framework. Tasked with regulating civil servant recruitment and bureaucratic reform, the Ministry relies on Public Relations and media officials to address misinformation-related crises. The fake official letters incident not only threatened institutional credibility but also heightened public dissatisfaction over limited civil service opportunities. As such misinformation spreads rapidly via WhatsApp, it challenges the Ministry's communication efforts and demands clear, transparent, and proactive responses.

Crisis Management

A crisis refers to an unexpected and highly uncertain event (Zhang et al., 2020) that produces negative outcomes, threatens stakeholders' expectations and has a serious impact on organizational performance (Coombs, 2007). A crisis is often associated with threats to priority aspects of human life, especially safety, property, security, health and psychological stability (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021). These threats can potentially trigger anxiety and encourage individuals or groups of people to act promptly to solve those issues. A crisis can further lead to problems and risks, and problems and risks can also trigger a crisis (Horsley & VanDyke, 2021). In crisis situations, organizations usually appoint a crisis management team, which is a group of people selected by high-level management to be responsible for emergency operations and crisis communication. The members of the team oversee various processes and outcomes, namely the legal, institutional, and financial consequences of the crisis (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2021). In brief, any crisis refers to a sudden detrimental situation for individuals and organizations, which may result in potential organizational damages

and victims that suffer from physical, psychological, and economic trauma. Such situations then require planning, strategizing and steering efforts to overcome the threats. Based on this theoretical framework, the case of the fake official letter promoting contract-based government employees to civil servant positions without any assessment is an issue that turned into a crisis as the dissemination of the fake letter has had adverse reputational, financial, and legal consequences for the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform and the citizens.

Paracrisis

The concept of paracrisis stems from the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Coombs (2018). It expands the scope of the SCCT by addressing the lack of implementation in the field of social media-driven crises (Coombs, 2017). SCCT is a crisis communication theory originally developed in Western context societies (Cheng & Lee, 2019). In relation to the theoretical trends in public relations research in a global context, countries in Europe, Asia, and Oceania often apply the SCCT or the image repair theory, both of which posit that the reputational threat of a crisis can be defined by the public's perception (Cheng et al., 2022).

Coombs (2023) named four important strategies for application, implementation and development of the SCCT: deny strategies, diminish strategies, rebuild strategies, and reinforcing/bolstering strategies. However, the use of denial strategies is no longer included in the list of crisis responses outlined in the SCCT and is not recommended when an organization is effectively involved in a crisis. One reason is that denial can actually create additional problems for an organization in a crisis situation—hence a suboptimal response. Second, it involves basic ethical responses. From an ethical point of view, the SCCT suggests that every crisis manager should prioritize a series of fundamental points before considering the proper crisis response strategies and recommendations. The ethical basis in question is a focus on the victims' expectations, perceptions and points of view during a crisis, which stems from affective empathy, or a response to the victims' situation based on emotions. The embodiment of the basic ethical response that crisis managers can provide to victims is to carry out crisis intervention effectively and to provide instructing and adjusting information responsibly (Coombs, 2023). Instructing information helps to inform people how to protect themselves physically and psychologically from crisis, whereas adapting information supports individuals to cope mentally with the crisis. The

dissemination of open and transparent information about a crisis will likely reduce the ambiguity and decrease the public's anxiety (Coombs, 2015).

However, the concept of "responsibility" in the SCCT is much closer to "accountability" than to "blame". "Blame" tends to imply a negative connotation and overlook the organizational efforts to find the roots of the crisis situation. On the other hand, accountability has a broader scope than responsibility as it acknowledges the importance of issue recognition followed by concrete actions, driving organizations to apply the principle of accountability in crisis intervention and not to merely accept responsibility and look for the causes of the problems. With the principle of accountability, they also gauge the level of acceptance of the message by scrutinizing the community's response to crisis intervention.

The word "paracrisis" per se contains the Latin prefix "para-" denoting "counter" or "versus" (Coombs, 2019, p. 21), which symbolizes a shield against potential hazards detrimental to the organization. It encapsulates the dual aspects of protection and proactive response against adversity. This concept is used to differentiate a crisis risk situation, a factor that has the potential to develop into a crisis and harm organizations, from major crises with severe consequences (Chen, 2023). Particularly, the emergence of a crisis within the realm of social media is often a distinct harbinger of impending turmoil. Given the transparent and ubiquitous nature of social media platforms, these warnings are readily discernible by many stakeholders, amplifying their significance and urgency (Coombs, 2019). The nature of paracrisis mapped in the SCCT will thus assist practitioners to determine the best response to reduce crisis risk in such context.

A paracrisis can be described as an issue or crisis that is similar to a crisis circulating on social media (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). It requires a rapid response because the crisis managers must prevent the negative consequences from affecting the stakeholders confronted with the paracrisis. This urgency is based on a paracrisis situation with a crisis risk that has the potential to develop, or not to develop, into a crisis (Chen, 2023). Managers can handle risks without needing to sound a crisis alarm and form crisis teams when a paracrisis occurs (Tachkova & Coombs, 2022). Thus, paracrisis is a pre-crisis phase that merges mitigation strategies and crisis risk responses. There are two factors that may transform a risk into a crisis, both of which stem from the response taken by the organization in paracrisis. When Coombs

(2020) developed his theory and provided his list of crises, he updated paracrisis in the social media era by simplifying it into two types, namely challenges and misinformation as seen in Table 1.

Table 1.

Crises and paracrises

Crisis	Crisis victim cluster	Product tampering
		Natural disaster
		Workplace violence
	Accidental crisis cluster	Technical-error accident
		Technical-error product harm
	Preventable crisis cluster	Human-error accident
		Human-error product harm
		Management misconduct
		Scams
Paracrisis	Challenge	the claim that the organization is engaging in irresponsible conduct
	Misinformation	incorrect and damaging information circulating about the organization

Note: Coombs’ (2020, p. 131) crisis and paracrisis categories.

A paracrisis challenge is a situation where there is a claim that the organization is involved in an irresponsible situation, while a misinformation crisis, like rumors, refers to situations where false, misleading, or harmful information about an organization circulates. Coombs (2023) has categorized misinformation and disinformation as paracrises, and they are no longer considered part of the range of crisis types in the SCCT. The acceptable response recommendation in misinformation crisis is to correct the misinformation (Coombs, 2019). Furthermore, Coombs provides a more complete explanation of the six paracrisis response options that can be taken by crisis managers.

Table 2

Coombs' paracrisis response recommendations

No.	Paracrisis Responses	Descriptions
1.	Refusal	Managers ignore the paracrisis and choose not to respond.
2.	Refutation	Managers claim the organization's actions or policies are not irresponsible.
3.	Repression	Managers try to suppress the paracrisis by preventing others from creating and spreading messages about the paracrisis.
4.	Recognition/ reception	Managers acknowledge that a problem exists but take no actions to address the problem.
5.	Revision	Managers make some changes to behaviors or policies, but they are not the exact changes requested by those disappointed with the organization.
6.	Reform	Managers make changes to behaviors or policies as requested by parties disappointed with the organization.

Note: Coombs, 2020, p. 132

Misinformation on Social Media and Crisis Response

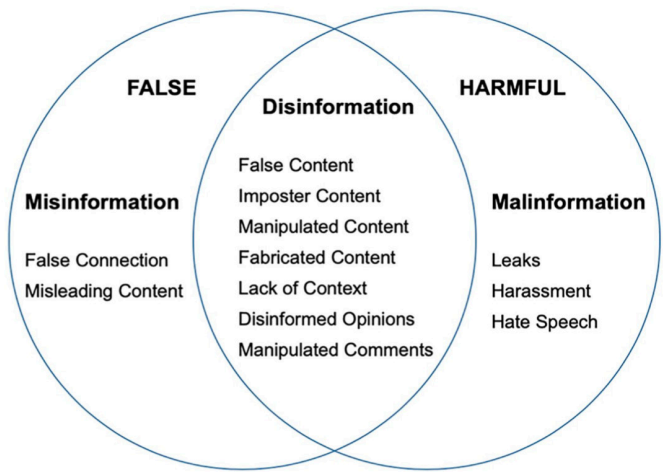
This study examines misinformation under UNESCO's classification system, which identifies three categories: misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. UNESCO categorizes deceptive content into three types: **misinformation**, **disinformation**, and **malinformation** (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). **Misinformation** refers to false or inaccurate information shared without harmful intent, often because the sender believes it to be correct and aims to inform or warn others. In contrast, **disinformation** consists of intentionally fabricated or manipulated information designed to mislead the public, shape perceptions, or serve specific interests. **Malinformation**, however, involves information that may be factually accurate but is used in a harmful way, typically by disclosing personal data or exploiting truth out of context to damage reputations, incite hatred, or serve private gain rather than the public good. Examples of malinformation include

hate speech, targeted harassment, and the improper use of private information (Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

Different types of fake news circulate on social media (Humprecht et al., 2020). Figure 1. depicts the intersecting nature of information between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. In this research, fake news falls into the category of misinformation, which contains misleading content and incorrect reasoning relationships. Misinformation can be classified as dangerous because it may include hate speech, harassment, and information leaks. On the other hand, disinformation is in a unique position because it falls into both false and harmful information categories. Some of the characteristics that are reflective of disinformation include false content, fraudulent content, manipulated content, fabricated content, lack of context, opinions with limited information, and manipulative comments.

Figure 1.

Types of fake news on social media



Note: Humprecht et al., 2020

The differences between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation can also be explored based on the veracity of the information and the intentions of people who disseminate it. Misinformation or rumors typically contain false and damaging information about an organization, whereas if the information is true, it can be seen as malinformation, which usually contains factual

information but is instead used for negative purposes, that is, to harm an individual, an organization, or a country (Carmi et al., 2020). Misinformation is closely related to disinformation, because both are false in nature, but those spreading them may have different goals. Misinformation refers to unintentional publication of false or misleading information, while disinformation refers to a false information that is shared strategically to cause harm (Humprecht et al., 2020), such as fake texts, images, and videos.

There are three main criteria that are indicative of disinformation, which are deception, potential for harm, and intent to cause harm (Freelon & Wells, 2020). The three characteristics demonstrate how disinformation is based on lies conveyed deliberately as factual information with the negative aim of harming other parties, either materially or immaterially. Disinformation is also often spread with specific purposes categorized based on qualitative subtypes, namely financial, ideological or psychological purposes (Kapantai et al., 2021). Moreover, from a content creation point of view, disinformation can be generated by humans, machines, or a combination of both (Shu et al., 2020).

Figure 2.

Creation and dissemination flow of false information

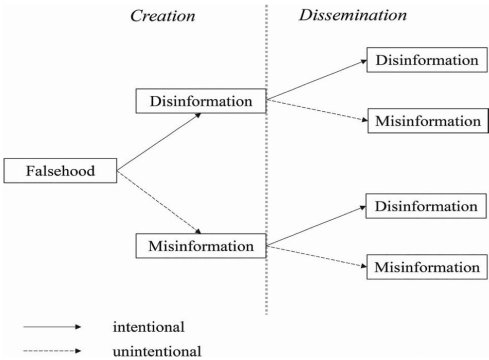


Figure 4.2 The Supply Chain of Falsehoods.

Note: Adapted from Lecheler and Egelhofer (2022, p. 71).

As the production and distribution of false information is a multi-step process, each instance of misinformation can become disinformation and *vice versa* (Lecheler & Egelhofer, 2022). It can be difficult to identify false information as either disinformation or misinformation if the intentions of the person or organization disseminating it are not known. If the actors involved in the production and distribution of false information know that the information is not true and have the intention to deceive other parties, the conveyed information can become disinformation. On the other hand, if the actors are unaware that the information is not true and deliberately share it, the information turns into misinformation. Suffice to say, the identification largely depends on the intentions of the actors publishing the information, which can further be hard to prove because those who want to mislead others tend to hide their identities and intentions (Guess & Lyons, 2020).

The issues caused by hoaxes or fake news can be complex because they involve actors who have certain motivations and methods, various message mediums, and the public. Each type of fake news might therefore require idiosyncratic measures to unfold the intentions of the perpetrators and examine the consequences for the potential victims. This research focuses on the different types of false content misinformation by identifying the characteristics of negative information in fake letters, particularly the fake letters issued on behalf of the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic. Even though the information in the fake letters is false and misleading, the intention of the actors who wrote and distributed the letter cannot be confirmed and validated, given that the digital medium of the message, WhatsApp, is private in nature. The study aims to examine how the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform's Public Relations Department conducted the management of misinformation, notably the fake official letters.

Methodology

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach to a case study (Grawitz, 2001; Yin, 2009), which aims at gaining deeper contextual understanding of behavior, beliefs, and motivation of actors (Hennink et al., 2020). The descriptive qualitative approach starts with hypotheses supported by interpretive and theoretical framework that shapes the research problem, and it addresses the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to specific social problems. The research report includes

the interviewees' points of view, researcher's reflection, description and interpretation of complex problems as well as their contribution to the literature (Creswell, 2013). On the other hand, the case study is a method that examines simple or complex phenomena on a large scale, varying from single individuals and large institutions to world-changing events (Berg & Lune, 2017).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four Public Relations officers from the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform, chosen for their direct involvement in managing crisis communication strategies on social media. Interview topics included decision-making processes, communication strategies, and misinformation management. Interviews ranged from 120 to 180 minutes, and participants provided informed consent. The data collected offers qualitative insights but is limited by factors such as the restricted access to certain digital platforms and the private nature of misinformation spread on WhatsApp, which makes tracking misinformation sources challenging.

This study complies with standard academic ethical guidelines governing research involving human participants. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia prior to data collection. All informants participated voluntarily after receiving a detailed explanation of the research purpose, their rights (including the right to withdraw at any point), and the intended use of the data. Written and verbal informed consent was secured from all participants, including permission to record and transcribe the interviews.

Confidentiality and anonymity were upheld throughout the research process by using initials (RR, DB, NP, NQ) in place of full names and by ensuring that no identifying information beyond professional roles was disclosed. Data were stored securely and used exclusively for academic purposes. The study adhered to ethical principles of integrity, confidentiality, and non-maleficence, ensuring minimal risk to participants and no conflict of interest.

Participants in this research were selected using purposive sampling, whereby the samples are chosen according to specific objectives or cases in order to cover populations that are difficult to gather (Neuman, 2014). The sampling of informants was adjusted to our research objective, which is to understand how the crisis communication management of fake letter was performed by Public Relations of the

Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform. The sampling criteria included individuals who are directly involved in making decisions and managing social media, namely the structural officials and staff in the Public Relations section of the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform. There were four informants selected based on these criteria, namely RR (Sub-Coordinator of Publications), DB (Partnership Analyst), NP (Twitter Administrator), and NQ (Instagram Administrator). Interviews were held from February 22 to March 10, 2023. Two interviews were conducted on-site, and two online via Zoom. Each interview lasted 120-180 minutes and was recorded with the consent of the informants.

The collected data were then discursively transcribed and qualitatively analysed through the phases of reduction, presentation, and inference drawing. Neuman (2014) mentions three data reduction techniques: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding allows the researchers to add themes and codes to label the data. Axial coding is the stage of forming codes that have been labeled on data based on a coding hierarchy. The codes were organized and linked to identify the relationship between concepts and themes. As the final step, selective coding was carried out to identify specific themes, which involved scrutinizing previous codes to select data supported the conceptual coding categories that had been developed, namely paracrisis, decision making, response strategy, and the result of strategy implementation.

Results

Findings show that the interviewees shared a common understanding and description of fake information and linked it to the existence of irresponsible individuals or groups of individuals that modified official letters with malicious intentions to spread misinformation. Even though their classification exhibited some different aspects and similarities, the interviewees unanimously agreed that the first action to take in a paracrisis situation was to clarify the content of the message (letters), and convey the truth to the public as quickly as possible.

One of the criteria for examining the authenticity of fake letters was based on the latest policies from the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform regarding the legal basis for civil servant recruitment. Law No. 5 of 2014 on State Civil Servants (SCS) explicitly stipulates that the appointment of civil servants and contract-based

government employees shall meet certain requirements. First, civil servants shall be Indonesian citizens who are appointed as SCS employees on a permanent basis by the civil service development officials to occupy government positions. Similarly, contract-based government employees shall also be Indonesian citizens who are appointed based on a work agreement for a certain period of time to perform government functions. The recruitment of these two types of staff cannot be done without a test, requiring a rigorous process to ensure that the candidates meet the requirements for the position that they apply for.

In addition to clarifying the content of the letters, the interviewees stressed the importance of checking the writing competencies of SCS when it comes to composing official documents. Fake letters often contain spelling errors and expressions that do not comply with the General Guidelines for Indonesian Spelling, for example, incorrect use of capital letters and misspelled names of departments. Policy-makers must also run a “truth-checking” process related to SCS recruitment to ensure whether the work unit has opened a new position and whether it has made the policies detailed in the letters. If any doubt remains, NQ remarks, “... to be sure, we usually also contact the relevant units. For example, we talk about contract-based employees and SCS appointments, we consult with the Human Resources Apparatus work units. Later there we will confirm whether this letter is correct or not.”

The four interviewees had a similar answer regarding their choice of response strategy, namely focusing on the interests of the community as potential victims. The messages drafted in response to the fake letters aimed at warning the public about the risk of crisis resulting from the fake letters. The correction strategy implemented by the Public Relations of the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform was based upon a transparent and unambiguous statement of the facts, which were further supported by visual evidence. No policy changes were brought about by the department considering that the letter did not offer a strong basis for amending Law No. 5 of 2014 on SCS. Moreover, given that the authors of the fake letters remained unknown, the response did not focus on discrediting the perpetrators but instead set priority on drafting messages to warn the public and prevent any potential victims.

NP, DB, and RR stated that there were legal implications related to the analysis of the fake letters: identifying perpetrators took longer time and more effort than addressing the content and clarifying the fake information. Searching and identifying the authors of the letters was a

difficult task considering the limitation of the organizational authority and the encrypted nature of messages on WhatsApp that protects the privacy of interactions and messaging—all of which have made it difficult to trace the main source of the misinformation.

Table 3

Crisis response of the fake letters

Paracrisis Type	Paracrisis Responses	Actions
Misinformation	Correction	Clarification from the Ministry of PANRB's Public Relations
	Repression	Suppression of the paracrisis by preventing others from creating and spreading messages about the paracrisis by giving the false message "hoax" label

Note: Researchers' analysis, 2023

The interviews also reveal that the participants were aware of the risks posed by the circulation of fake official letters, which then necessitated prompt paracrisis strategy responses. The interviewees made it clear that the expected benefits for society and organizations of timely response to the paracrisis outweighed the outcomes of merely remaining silent and not responding at all. While some were said to experience disappointment due to the dissemination of inaccurate information, others were noted to become more aware of the fake content and more well-equipped to protect themselves from potential harm. Therefore, the ministry managed to reap the benefits of proactively mitigating risks, averting fraud, and avoiding lawsuits.

The clarification messages were conveyed through digital channels, such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and the official website, which were directly managed by the Data, Communication, and Public Information Bureau of the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform. Intensive collaboration with various media as well as the drafting and publication of press releases helped the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform to reach a wider public. This strategy did not rely only on the use of the platform where the fake letters were initially spread (i.e., WhatsApp) but on diverse media. However, WhatsApp indeed exhibits some characteristics that surpassed the advantages of other in terms of

Table 4.

Consideration of crisis response regarding fake letters

Responses	Positive Impact	Negative Impact
Clarifying fake letters	Reduce the risk of financial loss Reduce the risk of lawsuits Minimize the risk of fake letters reappearing Educating the public about the characteristics of fake letters	Public disappointment because of the clarifications, which means the opportunity to be recruited is canceled
Not taking any actions	Avoid negative public sentiment	Risk of financial loss, risk of lawsuits, risk of fake letters reappearing, public ignorance of the characteristics of fake letters

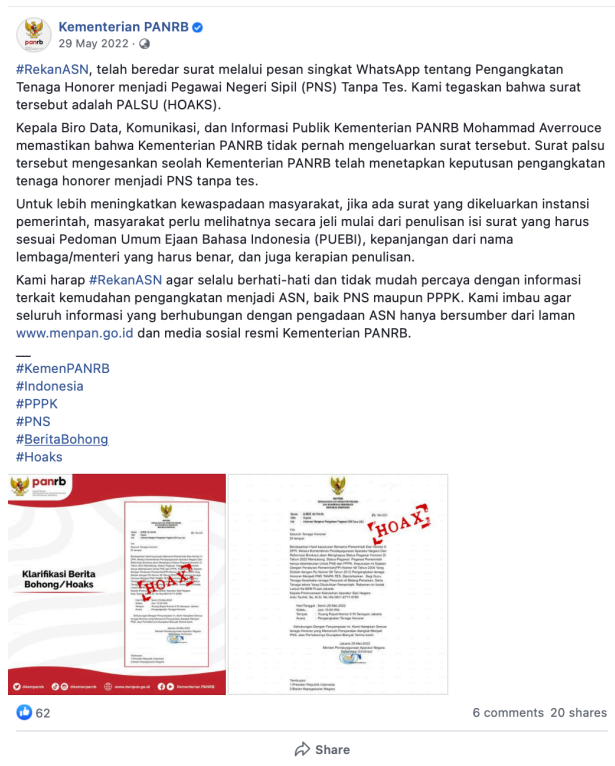
Note: Researchers’ analysis, 2023

its outreach, which is attributed to its closed-group structure, which can leverage the interconnected networks within groups. Even news media also relied on press releases sent from WhatsApp as a reference for creating digital and print news content. The main content of the message conveyed to the public included (a) the source of the wrong information, (b) the content of the wrong information, (c) the corrected information, (d) parts of the letter that need to be checked, (e) encouragement to always stay alert, and (f) tips to verify information. An example of the message content is presented in Figure 3

In addition to focusing on the structure of the message, the text-based content was also supported by visual evidence to counter the spread of the fake letters, increase the attractiveness and trust in the corrections submitted by the organization. However, it is worth noting that the visual evidence presented to the public with no clear marks indicating both correct or incorrect information may have the potential to implicate the organization in the further dissemination of such incorrect information. Thus, as shown in Figure 3, the fake letter was clearly stamped with the mark “hoax.” Such visual display is expected to help the public identify the characteristics of the fake letters as misinformation. The visual

Figure 3.

Clarification posted on the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform's Facebook on May 29 2022.



Note: Translation of Figure 3. #FellowCivilServants, there has been a letter circulating through WhatsApp messages regarding (b) the Appointment of Contract-Based Employees as State Civil Servants Without Exams. We strongly declare that the letter is FAKE (HOAX). The Head of the Bureau of Data, Communication, and Public Information of the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform, Mohammad Averrouce, ensures that (c) the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform has never issued such a letter. The fake letter suggests as if the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform had decided to appoint contract employees as civil servants without exams. To further raise public awareness, (d) if there is a letter issued by government agencies, the public needs to carefully examine it, notably the content of the letter which must adhere to the General Guidelines for Indonesian Spelling, the correct abbreviation of the institution/ministry's name, and also the neatness of the writing. (e) We urge #FellowCivilServants to always be cautious and not

easily believe information related to the ease of appointment as civil servants, both SCS and contract-based employees. (f) We recommend that all information related to civil servant recruitment only come from the official website www.menpan.go.id and official social media of the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform (Kementerian PANRB, 2022b).

evidence presented in different colors is also important to attract people's attention on social media, considering that social media have their distinct characteristics in the way they present information. Instagram is a good instance of social media that prioritizes visual contents. As noted by NQ, "On the first post people have to at least take a glance at the post. If people aren't immediately interested, it definitely won't be open next time. That is why the 'hoax' (text) is big and red-colored." The same respondent explained that people tend to trust information that is accompanied by visual evidence, suggesting that messages to tackle misinformation spread by fake letters can greatly benefit from visual support as it increases the reliability of official information.

An alternative strategy to the corrective strategies implemented by crisis managers was to give priority to a more personal approach to the person who wrote the fake letter, provided that the author can be identified. These strategies are carried out simultaneously with the clarification efforts to ensure that the sources of information can be tracked, and dissemination process can be halted. However, this is only in the case of the false information reports or fake letters where the perpetrator can be clearly identified. As DB explained (personal communication, January 30, 2023)

A cease and desist letter serves as the initial formal notice to halt unauthorized activities. If it is obeyed (by the perpetrator), then a lawsuit will not be filed ... or we can approach (the perpetrator), and a lawsuit is the final step (based on legal perspective).

In the context of a fake recruitment letter concerning the Indonesian Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform, a cease and desist letter would be a formal legal notice sent to the perpetrators. This letter aims to demand the immediate cessation of fraudulent activities, such as distributing fake information about employment opportunities. By addressing the matter seriously and providing the legal foundation for further action if non-compliance persists, this letter serves as the first step in mitigating reputational and operational damage. The Public

Relations of the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform can contact the perpetrator who creates the fake information or letter and give her or him a warning as well as a formal request to delete the misinformation. If the perpetrator is cooperative, a humanist approach will then be a beneficial step for both parties, mitigating the risk of loss of energy, time and financial expenses in case a lawsuit is necessary.

The next strategy is a legal lawsuit in case a fake letter has materially or immaterially harmed numerous organizational and social aspects. A police report should be filed by organizations or communities that have experienced losses against the perpetrator, with three major conditions to be met in the legal claim. First, the letter can be proven to be a letter that does not come from the organization. Second, there are victims who suffer material or immaterial consequences and losses. Third, there is irrefutable evidence of fraud. The respondents stated that the steps taken by the Public Relations of the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform to overcome the misinformation spread by the fake letters were effective, particularly regarding the urgency of the situation. The correction that had been made was designed to counter the circulation of fake letters until they subsided a few days later.

The findings echo those of Claeys and Opgenhaffen (2021), who state that the crisis management might have severe legal and financial consequences if the crisis is not taken seriously. The legal and financial consequences of the fake letters might lead to lawsuits if they harm someone. The Public Relations office of the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform did not show consideration of these two elements in dealing with the fake letters because they had determined the priorities of the messages shared to the public, namely to clarify information and educate the public. This focus strengthens the argument of Kartikawangi (2020) that the Indonesian government tends to prioritize the dissemination of public information when using social media for crisis management.

The crisis response taken by the Public Relations office of the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform is in accordance with recommendations from the SCCT as it prioritizes the basic ethical responses. An ethical response is carried out by organization when it conveys instructions and clarifies information when a crisis threatens potential victims (Brunner, 2019, p. 86), which aims to reduce the ambiguity of problems and anxiety (Coombs, 2015). Within the realm of debunking the counterfeit letter, it becomes apparent that the document

not only disseminates information details indicative of its fraudulent nature but also embeds a compelling narrative, prompting the public to remain vigilant and report to the Ministry any doubts regarding the authenticity of information. It is expected that these three elements can protect the public so that they do not easily believe dubious recruitment information. The messages contained in the clarification note of the fake letter submitted by the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform's Public Relations show the implementation of such basic ethical responses (Coombs, 2023), focusing on the expectations of victims or potential victims. In addressing the fake letter incident, the Public Relations Department of the PANRB Ministry opted for a corrective approach (Coombs, 2019), and made available transparent information and verified facts to counteract erroneous content.

Conclusion

The case of the fake official letters falls under Coombs' concept of paracrisis, which contributes to the understanding of the fight against misinformation on social media. Handling fake content has several considerations in crisis communication practice, including ethical grounds, time constraints, message formulation, social media logic, legal consequences and financial consequences. The main driving factors for decision making in responding to paracrisis are knowledge and organizational policies. Fact-checking capabilities of government institutions are also an important step in determining whether the crisis spreads misinformation. However, there are some factors obstructing the decision-making process, such as limited budget or lack of other financial resources.

In addressing the issue of misinformation, this study provides alternative strategies for crisis managers who can identify perpetrators who create misinformation and carry out confrontations and lawsuits to suppress the spread of false messages. Public organizations cannot always rely on issue monitoring carried out by third parties because there are channels such as WhatsApp that are difficult to access and because risks often cannot be monitored in depth. This then requires the organization and internal stakeholders to conduct monitoring of such issues, resulting in perceptual congruence among the stakeholders to facilitate the decision-making process in response to paracrisis.

This study's limitations include the relatively small sample size and challenges in accessing private information sources, limiting broader

generalizations. Future research could explore comparative analyses of misinformation management across Indonesian ministries or conduct international comparisons with countries facing similar challenges. Longitudinal studies on the effects of misinformation on public trust in governmental institutions would also provide valuable insights. Additionally, future work could examine the role of digital literacy programs and proactive government communication to strengthen misinformation resilience among Indonesian citizens.

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