Selecting Information Sources in Times of Crisis

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Abstract

The Indonesian government has employed communication strategies such as leveraging new media and big data to provide its citizens with information during the Covid-19 global pandemic. Previous research has shown that these are some tools that were used by digital PR practitioners during a crisis. However, it is said that research on usage of new media has been focused on the organizational perspective. This article conducted an exploratory study on how and why users select certain forms of new media to search for information. An in-depth interview with three informants was done to gain a societal perspective. Uses and gratifications theory, including its development due to the advancement of technology in Industry 4.0, served as a framework to analyze the data gathered from the interview. The results showed that all three informants tend to use alternative new media because of the gratification it provides, instead of Gugus Tugas's official website. This article contributes to the literature on new media user behavior in selecting information sources in times of crisis. It also provides practical and theoretical insights for future studies.

Kata kunci/Keywords:
new media; digital public relation; public sector; uses and gratifications theory; qualitative study

Introduction

The digital disruption caused by Industry 4.0 not only affects multiple industries, but also reconstructs the way a particular industry operates. Its implications towards the communication industry is that it allows the transformation of the communication process from analog to digital with the advent of internet-based new media (Mizanie & Irwansyah, 2019). This has optimized the mass communication process which enables communicators to reach a wider audience through computer-mediated communication (CMC). Evidently, the nature of new media serves as an opportunity but also challenges for public relations (PR) practitioners, where communication patterns transform from one-to-
many to many-to-many which brings dimensions of trust and transparency as criteria of consideration (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008).

The most cited definition of public relations is that of Grunig & Hunt (1984), who defined PR as “communication management between an organization and its publics”. Bates (2006) pointed out that PR is the effort to build a mutually beneficial relationship between the organization and stakeholders, which includes customers, users, investors, employees, the government, etc. In other words, PR is the effort to build and maintain relationships with the public which aims to muster public support for the organization. With the advent of Industry 4.0, there has been an integration of PR and the use of new media on the internet, resulting in the terminology of digital PR.

Huang et al., (2017) defined digital PR as “management of the communication between an organization and its public through internet applications”. It is an extension of Grunig & Hunt’s (1984) definition of PR by highlighting the digital virtual dimension as well as the recognition of internet applications as a new channel. Internet applications as channels for digital PR can be classified into two categories: web 1.0-based applications, which typically includes websites and emails where readers are passive readers, and web 2.0-based applications, which consists of blogs, microblogs i.e. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, etc., where users can generate user-generated content (UGC) and can interact in a participatory manner (Huang et al., 2017). Meranti & Irwansyah (2018) added that digital PR strategies focus on the online platforms and social media to reach a virtual space, giving room for new professions such as social media activists and buzzers. Digital PR in-houses can also leverage new media as tools for disseminating information. Bajaj et al. (2015) identified the new media channels most utilized in times of crisis by conducting an in-depth interview with senior communication executives from ten different industries. Interestingly, they have found that Short Message Service (SMS), emails, mobile telephony, websites and blogs to be the highest ranking new media channels utilized in crisis communication.

Digital PR can also enhance the PR practice of the public sector. PR in the public sector or government PR is defined as an instrument to advertise the purpose of public policy and to improve government’s relationship with the public in order to increase public’s trust in the government (Park & Cho, 2009). There have been numerous alternative communication channels used as a public relations tool as a response to the development of information and communication technology. The utilization of these communication channels is one way to address and mitigate the inadequacy of communication and information asymmetry between government and the public which results in the distrust of government institutions (Garnett, 2005). Public trust is the public’s cognitive reflection regarding the information they receive on the government’s performance, and is indicative of the gap between public’s expectation and reality (Moon, 2002). It is the result of the level of transparency, efficiency, effectiveness from the government. The lack of public trust towards the government implies the public’s withdrawal of support and compliance towards the government’s decisions. Hence in this context, the public may turn away from the government’s official accounts on new media and use social media as a source of information. This behavior raises concerns because as contents such as news articles and entertainment are blended together on social media, users tend to pay less attention to the source of the content (Pearson, 2020). As a result, user’s ability to process content will decline, important contents may be processed inattentively, increase the belief in misinformation and reduce media literacy, which worsens the effort to mitigate a crisis.

Coombs (2010) defined crisis as “perception of unpredictable events which threatens important expectations of stakeholders and can impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes”. A crisis presents a fundamental threat for the stability of the system in an organization, questions its core assumptions and beliefs, as well as acts as a risk to the organization’s image, legitimacy, profitability and survival (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002). Bajaj et. al (2015) explained that different stakeholders require different technical explanations during a crisis. Different crisis responses utilized by organizations affect the outcomes on organizational reputation differently, but can also generate anger and negative word-of-mouth (Coombs & Holladay, 2009).

Understanding the risks of the widespread hoax and misinformation, the government has made efforts to minimize this by utilizing new media to disseminate information. However, this perception still sees the government as an organization. Bajaj et al. (2015) stated that the usage of new media have much been focused on the organizational perspective. The need for audience oriented research towards new media use, especially in times of crisis, has not been addressed properly. This research aims to fill the gap of the audience-based study on use of new media in crisis situations through an exploratory study using the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) as a framework. By conducting the study using Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), we can understand what gratifications users look for when using new media which then can be adopted to the new media used by the government. The objective of this research was not to get a generalization of results, but to explore why users use certain forms of new media in times of crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia serves as a case study of how users choose new media chan-
nels in times of crisis. As of the time this research was conducted, Indonesia is still fighting the war against the globally spread virus. Therefore, it is important to set a time frame in order to gain focus in the study. The informants will be questioned on their information gathering behavior during the pandemic, starting from the first time a Covid-19 case was announced by the President in early March 2020, through to the time when the regulations were loosened for citizens under 45 years old who are fit enough to resume activities outside their houses in spite of the implementation of the large-scale social restrictions or pembatasan sosial berskala besar (PSBB) in May 2020. Therefore, the research questions of this article are as follows:

1. What forms of new media do audiences use to gather information on the pandemic?
2. What government's new media do the audience use to gather information on the pandemic?
3. Why does the audience use certain types of new media to gather information on the pandemic?

The researchers hope the results of this study not only fill the gap of lack of research on new media usage during a crisis, but also serve as an insight through the user's perspective for the public sector so that improvements can be made on how they utilize new media in times of crisis. Suggestions for future studies are made at the end of this article.

**Literature Review**

**Digital PR of the Public Sector in Industry 4.0 era**

The transformation caused by Industrial Revolution 4.0 is not limited to the private sector. Government agencies are also under pressure to digitize their services and internal process. It is important to note that to automate and digitize large entities such as the government institutions is a challenging task. Upgrading internal IT systems, legal clearance, coordination within and amongst the government, developing human capital and ensuring public's data security are just some of the challenges that face the government’s digitization (McKinsey Global Institute, 2018). McKinsey Global Institute stated that automation and digitization promises better customer service, efficiency in day-to-day operations as they free up public administrator’s repetitive jobs and increase citizen participation. Customer service and citizen participation can be done through the use of new media.

The Indonesian government adopted digitized technologies after the Presidential Instruction No. 3/2003 was announced in July 2003, which instructs the application of e-government in the country to promote efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and accountability and transform towards an information society (Hasnawati & Salamah, 2017). The data from Indonesian Inter-
tical knowledge needed of users to construct and share their contents as they do on social media (Harrison & Barthel, 2009).

As previously mentioned by Huang et al. (2017), users are typically passive readers on websites compared to when they are on social media. However, with the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) in the Industry 4.0 era, some government websites have added a chatbot feature on their home pages. Chatbot is a software that mimics conversations with humans by using artificial intelligence (AI) and artificial language processing (Bakhshi, 2018). Binsar & Salamah (2018) stated that chatbots can be utilized as a public relations tool. With big data stored in the cloud, each interaction with the bot makes them more adaptable to new information or new requests (Radziwill & Benton, 2017), so the process for analysis and providing answers to users can be done faster than with humans.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Coronavirus Disease Response Acceleration Task Force or Gugus Tugas website have added this feature on their home page. It provides information ranging from explanation on Coronavirus, what are the measures that can be done to avoid it, government regulations around the issue, etc. Aside from that, the government through the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology also launched a chatbot on WhatsApp in March 2020 which also serves the same purpose as the one on Gugus Tugas website.

**Uses and Gratifications theory in new media environment**

Blumler and Katz developed uses and gratification theory (UGT) in 1974 and considered as one of the axiomatic theories used in communication discipline. UGT aims to explain how one seeks out media that fulfill their needs and generate ultimate gratification (Lariscy et al., 2011). The assumptions of this theory are: (1) individuals use the media for their respective purposes, (2) individuals use media to fulfill their satisfaction, (3) media compete to get user’s attention and time, (4) media will have different influences on different people, (5) people can report motivation and use of media accurately (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 347-350). Blumler and Katz indicated that audiences are not passive media consumers, instead they choose which media to use and what effect they desire from the media (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 347). They reversed the focus which often asks “what effects does the media have on users” to “what does users do with the media available”, making it user-centric. Rubin (1994) added that uses and gratification theory aims to explain the psychological needs that shape why people use media and what motivates them to engage in certain media use behaviors for gratification that meet these intrinsic needs. In other words, gratifications are conceptualized as “satisfaction of needs” which is obtained when the user’s expectation and needs are met through certain types of media. Traditionally, gratifications gained through media are based on the user’s pre-existing needs rather than the technological feature of media.

UGT is often linked to dependency theory which assumes that users are dependent on the media to seek gratification and develop a dependency on certain media (Litttlejohn et al., 2017, p. 979). Dependency theory emphasizes the power of media over an individual in which the more gratifications received from one form of media, the more dependent they are towards it. There are various reasons for an individual to be dependent on certain media, such as their needs and objectives of looking into it, their social conditions and life attributions. Dependency theory may raise a concern because when one makes no comparison of the media they are dependent on, they may not be able to be critical towards it.

UGT have been widely used in various disciplines, such as political science and the dissemination of political message, but it can also be relevant to help explain new media uses (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Many studies have developed the scale of gratification in UGT (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000), the main ones being (1) social interaction, (2) information seeking, (3) pass time, (4) entertainment, (5) relaxation, (6) communicatory utility, (7) convenience utility. Palmgreen & Rayburn (1979) have also added that there are two dimensions of gratifications which are gratification sought and gratifications received.

Windhal (1981) argued that scholars need to have a combination of viewpoints in order to refine the theoretical basis of UGT, and that is: (1) media perceptions and expectations guide people’s behaviour, (2) interest and externally imposed constraints derives one’s needs and motivations, (3) there are functional alternatives to media consumption, and (4) media content plays an important role in media effects. Although UGT is considered as an axiomatic theory in communications, it is not without its criticism from scholars. Some of the criticisms include the confusing operational definition and analytical model, as well as the overarching reach of the theory in assuming that people are “free” to choose the media they want (Stanford, 1983; White, 1994).

UGT once fell out of favor by mass communication scholars, but with the rapid development of information & communication technology, UGT research is evermore relevant to explore the decision-making behaviors of users because of the increasingly diverse source of information. Ruggero (2000) identified attributes of data that cannot be found in the traditional media: (1) interactivity, (2) demassification, (3) asynchronicity. Interactivity refers to the amount of choices given to the users, the effort users need to gain information, and how responsive a medium is to its users. Demassification refers to the user’s ability to select from a wide range of sources. Asynchronicity refers to the concept of staggered messag-
es, where users can send, receive and save messages to their own convenience. The concept of active audience is gaining credibility among new media researchers. As users are presented with a wider range of sources and channels of information, they tend to select the media that provides their areas of interest (Ruggiero 2000). Ruggiero (2009) further argues that the traditional UGT is too audience-centered and does not consider the influence technology can have on the selection of media and the gratifications gained from it.

Sundar & Limperos (2013) argued that with the advent of new media, the traditional UGT also experienced developments along with information and communication technology developments. They illustrated that recent research on UGT utilized the traditional scale of gratification formulated for old media which has a lack of specificity. Therefore, it is not sensitive enough to identify the specific gratifications of new media. With emergence of new media, as well as new ICT, there could be new gratifications which will improve the scope and relevance of UGT in the new media environment. Sundar (2008) formulated the MAIN Model which identified the technological affordances of new media which comprised of:

1. **Modality-based gratifications** refers to the multimedia feature of new media, which allows various methods of presentation of media content and engaging different human perceptual systems (i.e. seeing, hearing, listening), this includes gratifications such as realism, coolness, novelty and ‘being there’. Presenting information in multiple modalities is convenient and perceptually and cognitively significant.

2. **Agency-based gratifications** refers to the affordability of the internet which allows users to be sources of information (i.e. through SNS channels) without limitation of gatekeepers which historically has been the domain of media institutions. This creates a sense of community as users create user-generated content, where one study suggests that content chosen by other users as being more worthy than written by professional journalists (Sundar & Nass, 2001). Agency-based gratifications include agency-enhancement, community building, filtering, etc.

3. **Interactivity-based gratifications** refers to the affordance which allows users to have real-time interactions in the content in the medium. News presentations are dynamic and are followed by consumer’s dynamic management. This gratification is said to be a double-edged sword as users desire more interactivity, but too much of it is equivalent to no interactivity at all. Interactivity also suggests openness of information access. These gratifications include interaction, activity, responsiveness and dynamic control.

4. **Navigability-based gratifications** refers to the movement’s users can make in the interface of the medium. This includes scaffolding gratification such as “are you sure you want to proceed?” questions found in sites, and play gratification found in games. Navigability-based gratifications include browsing/variety-seeking, scaffolding/navigation aids, play/fun.

Whiting & Williams (2013) conducted a qualitative study using UGT to explore why consum-
ers use social media. The research was based on in-depth interviews of 25 individuals, which demonstrates individual’s top three reasons for using social media which were social interaction, information seeking, and pass time (88%, 80%, and 76% respectively). They concluded that the application of exploratory approach on uses and gratifications theory studies is needed because it provides a rich and comprehensive understanding of why individuals use certain communication channels such as social media.

Research Methodology
This research employs a qualitative approach by conducting an in-depth interview with three informants from distinctive backgrounds. Qualitative research studies how individuals make meaning regarding the events or context happening around them and their behaviors towards it (Neuman, 2014, p. 179). Alshenqeeti (2014) added that the aim of using non-numerical data in qualitative research is to explore and describe the quality and nature of human behavior, their experience and understanding towards a certain issue. The collection of data in this research comprises two steps; (1) a literature review of previous studies in line with utilization of new media in digital PR practices and uses and gratifications theory, (2) an in-depth semi-structured interview towards three informants, (3) thematic analysis through coding.

The semi-structured interview is chosen because it allows more flexibility for the researchers to probe deeper into the interviewees responses and cover all areas relevant for the study by also keeping a list of research questions (Alshenqeeti, 2014). The researchers then conducted a coding process to arrange the data gathered from the interview. Alshenqeeti (2014) explained that coding purposely reduces the amount of data collected through an interview in order to generate meaningful data units as well as to classify and organize them. A thematic analysis was done by categorizing the raw data into conceptual categories elaborated in the literature review. These data are then used to report, analyze and justify the information and answers given in relation to the research questions.

The informants’ criteria are those under the age of 45 years old, which is adapted from the Indonesian government regulation of giving opportunity for younger people under the age of 45 with good immunity to resume economic activities, despite still implementing the large-scale social restrictions or pembatasan sosial berskala besar (PSBB). The researchers utilized purposive sampling method to recruit the informants. This sampling method is used in most qualitative studies, where researchers use judgement to select unique cases that are especially informative with specific purpose in mind (Neuman, 2014, p. 273). At some point from the initial announcement of the first case of Covid-19 in Indonesia in early March 2020 until this regulation was announced, these informants had to carry out economic activities outside their house even with the implementation of PSBB. Therefore, they must search for relevant information regarding the developments of the spread of the pandemic before resuming their activities. All informants have distinctive backgrounds, which will contribute to a broader understanding of the topic. Moreover, by employing in-depth interviews with these informants will allow researchers to conduct triangulation which allows multiple perspectives on a topic (Neuman, 2014, p. 166).

Considering the wide range of new media to gather information from, the informants need to select various forms of new media to suit their needs. Concerning this matter, the uses and gratifications theory serves as a framework to explore how and why these informants select from the various new media to gather information regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, especially from the initial announcement of Covid-19 case in Indonesia until the loosening regulation which allows those under 45 years old to resume activities as before the pandemic.

Results
The interview was conducted with three informants from various industries; property developer, oil & energy, and tourism. They were in the age range of under 45 years old and the diverse background was intended to give a broad perspective on how and why these individuals choose the new media they use. The informants were selected based on their positions in their respective companies, by which they were required to resume some form of office duties outside of their homes from the announcement of the first Covid-19 case in Indonesia in early March 2020 until the loosening of PSBB regulations in May 2020.

4.1 Twitter as the main SNS used to gather information
The results from the interview shows all three informants choose Twitter as their main SNS to gain information, even though they use it in different frequencies. Twitter is a microblogging site allowing users to convey their opinion in a short and concise manner, whereas of 2017, users are allowed 280 characters per tweet only. Carley et al. (2015) stated that the key advantages of Twitter are crowdsourcing of information, speed, and ability to be accessed from mobile devices. On the other hand, Twitter can be biased in user base, inaccurate, false, and out-of-date information. Despite these disadvantages, Indonesia is often one of the countries of most Twitter users. As of 2019, there are approximately 23 million Twitter users in Indonesia (Statista, 2020).

The high use of Twitter is supported by the statements from the informants of this study where all three informants are frequent Twitter
users. Informant #1 most frequently use Twitter because there is new information at a faster pace and provides various sources of information, whether it is through influencers or activists online.

(I choose) Twitter because of the speed of information, there are many to choose from and not only from one source. There are many articles and even information from influencers or activists on the platform. So, you’re not fixed on one source and if you think it is invalid, you can check from other sources regarding the information. (I choose) Twitter because of the variety of sources to choose from.
- informant #1

Informant #2 agrees by also adding that the information spread on Twitter is mostly in written form and some are attached to an external link, which gives an even more diverse source of information. In addition, informant #2 sought entertainment or escapism from her busy daily life.

If we’re talking about social media platforms, I usually go to Twitter. There are a lot of interesting people to follow and source of news, too. I follow one of Reuters journalists and the external links that he attaches provide real numbers and analysis, as well as different perspectives compared to Indonesian mainstream media. This is what I find interesting to read because this information is not given by the government here. That is why I am skeptical when the government says the increase of the infected cases is no longer significant.

But to be honest, I use social media as a distraction from my daily activities. (To) distract my mind when I’m tired and bored of work. Like, sometimes you find some terrible things going on in the world and some influencers can do silly things, and you get annoyed.
- informant #2

Informant #3 initially updates on the development of the number of Covid-19 cases from the Gugus Tugas announcement aired every evening on television. However, as the spread and quantity of people affected by the pandemic increases, he turned to Twitter to search for comparative data. He found that many users are reporting on site situations more often than what is reported on television. Furthermore, according to his observations, the number of Twitter users have ‘reduced’ since there are other SNSs such as Instagram and TikTok where users are more motivated to share photos and videos. As a microblogging site, Twitter is used by those who enjoy writing, despite not being 100% accurate but the information dissemination is much faster.

I divide my information selection into three sections. Initially I tuned into the Gugus Tugas’s LIVE broadcast on the television every afternoon. I considered it as a credible source at the time. However, after one or two weeks since the announcement of the first Covid-19 case, I tried to look for comparison data from the internet, such as Twitter.

As a microblogging site, Twitter is a place for users who do enjoy writing and would give, I wouldn’t say actual, but in terms of speed is much faster. There are also people who are constrained to head out and fulfill their obligations outside the house, hence understand the situation on site.
- informant #3

Government Handled New Media

Aside from Twitter, there are other platforms that users access to look for information, such as websites and mobile applications managed by the local or state level government. Pikobar (Pusat Informasi & Koordinasi Provinsi Jawa Barat or West Java Province Information & Coordination Center) is one of the mobile applications developed by the West Java provincial government, launched in March 2020.

According to informant #1, Pikobar is an all-in-one application not only providing the numerical data of the Covid-19, but also news, statements of West Java’s Governor, a self-check whether one is infected or not, etc. Informant #1 thinks she can rely on the validity of the application, since it is from the government, even if some news takes longer to update.

In my opinion, Pikobar is relatively slow, it lags a couple of days for them to update. For example when Ridwan Kamil said Bekasi was a green zone during Eid ul Adha, but the application hasn’t said so. However, I still go to Pikobar, since it’s information from the government, because if I share information and other people ask me where it’s from, they would suspect it’s invalid if it were accessed only from the media. Whereas their suspicion would reduce if I said it was from Pikobar. It’s actually quite a comprehensive application.

You can also use it for checking whether you have symptoms of Covid-19, where you can answer from a chatbot. If the results show that you need to take a rapid or swab test, you can print out the results and go to the referred hospital.
- informant #1
Another new media developed by the government is that of Gugus Tugas. The Coronavirus Disease Response Accelerations Task Force or Gugus Tugas have launched an official website to provide more centralized information, which can be reached at www.covid19.co.id. The head of Gugus Tugas, Doni Monardo, stated that this website is hoped to be the official reference for one-door information about the corona virus and how to control it (Prayoga, 2020). Aside from providing information on the corona virus updates, the website also includes real-time updates on the number of positive cases as well as a “Hoax Buster” feature which can be used to determine the validity of information. It also features a chatbot, where you would first have to register your name and phone number, then you will be able to have the conversation with the bot, covering topics such as the virus, the health protocol, the regulations surrounding it, etc.

Despite the government efforts to provide information through new media, informants #2 and #3 withholds from intentionally accessing the government’s new media. Instead, they only accidentally receive updates from the government through WhatsApp groups or SMS from Gugus Tugas.

I don’t visit (the government website), but I receive updates every day from someone giving me the information on WhatsApp you know, like they forward it. So, from like a group. But, no, I don’t visit it to be honest. I opened the Ministry of Health website and I think the user interface is poor. It makes me dizzy when I look at it. When I compare it to Singapore’s Ministry of Health’s website, I think it’s more informative. Like, how they present it’s very straightforward, you know? It’s also more centralized, like it also tells you the protocol, the documents needed if you go in and out of Singapore, etc., it’s so easy to access. I think Indonesia’s Ministry of Health’s website can be improved by making its user interface more easy on the eyes and straightforward.

- informant #2

To intentionally access (government website), no. I don’t do it. But I always get texts from Gugus Tugas, I don’t know why. I think it’s because I still do work outside of the house and they track my location. Maybe that is their way to educate people about how to counter the crisis. I think the government’s use of new media, in terms of quantity, is enough. But in terms of quality and effectiveness, it’s still insufficient. One way to look at it is, if the cases keep rising, then it’s not effective. Because they may use the platforms, but people may not read it. Aside from that, we can see that they provide the numbers, such as odp and pdp, how many have died, how many have recovered. And so... what? Whereas international news, they are able to use the number to further analyze the impact, on say for example... the development of vaccines, etc. That is what I see from the media abroad.

- informant #3

Online News Portals, YouTube, Instagram and chatbots
Informant #2 mainly uses online news portals such as Jakarta Post and Sky News to get her daily updates on the Covid-19 situation. According to her, Jakarta Post is one of the news portals that report on situations from a different angle compared to mainstream news portals. Aside from that, she also appreciates the user interface of the website which is easy to navigate. Furthermore, she accesses the Sky News portal as well as their YouTube channel to watch it on her smart TV.

I started reading the Jakarta Post in 2019 during the presidential election. In my opinion, Jakarta post is the media that is closest to neutral and more in depth. They cover from different angles compared to other media. I also like the interface. As for Sky News, I read the paper but mostly watch it on their LIVE streaming on Youtube. I watch it on my smart TV every morning before I start work.

- informant #2

As mentioned above, YouTube is one of the platforms that users access to look for information. Informant #3 also go on this platform because as his interest on the information of the pandemic decreases, he started accessing YouTube where some news portals and independent channels such as Opini.id and Asumsi concise the information into short videos, containing only the core of the news. These videos give him a new perspective on what has happened in the past, what is happening now as well as what can happen in the future.

As for the last step, after I have lost interest in the numerical data from the government, I tend to access YouTube because there are a lot of channels that produce videos which tells you the main information, like Opini.id, Asumsi, Dedy Corbuzier’s podcast and so on. These channels give me a new perspective about what is going on in the past, what is going on now, and how things might roll out in the future.

- informant #3
Informant #1 is the only one who mentioned that she also uses Instagram to get information. She thinks that there is a variety of information to choose from. However, she doesn’t focus on which media disseminates the information, but rather from her network on the platform who shares the information.

It’s the same. Although, I don’t look at which media, but rather from the people I follow on Instagram. Like my friends share a lot of information, too. So, they received information from whichever media, then they forward it to me. It’s rather the sharing of information between friends and not direct search to certain media on Instagram for me.

- informant 1

All three informants agree that they would rarely use chatbot to gather information. Despite the sophistication that the AI system offers through chatbot and the fast response users get from it, the informants would initially consider what type of information they are searching for. Both informants #1 and #2 considers the specificity of the information they are looking for. For example, if their questions match the options from the chatbot, then they would definitely utilize it. However, they can find the answers from other channels such as online news portals or Twitter. As for informant #3, he does not want to use the chatbot from the government because up until now he finds that there are a lot of shortcomings from the features or accessibility. On the other hand, some of his considerations when choosing media is that it must be easily accessible with good features, starting from the user interface, speed of loading data, updating the safety features etc. Therefore, the informants’ sought gratification cannot be fulfilled through the chatbot features on Gugus Tugas website or COVID19 chatbot on WhatsApp.

Discussion

Despite the government’s efforts to use new media as their PR tools, informants tend to lean toward alternative sources of information. Twitter was the main social network site (SNS) that was used by all three informants as it gives multiple gratifications towards users; entertainment, navigability-based gratification, and agency-based gratification. The entertainment gratification (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979) was seen through the usage of Twitter as an escape ‘from informant #2’s daily life activities. Informants #1 and #2 both approve Twitter’s feature that enables users to attach external links, which links to Sundar’s (2008) navigability-based gratifications. The allowance for users to generate user-generated content (UGC) that can be gratified through new media is linked to the agency-based gratifications (Sundar, 2008) which stated that new media allows users to be sources of information without having to go through gatekeepers.

Knowing that the informants take the news and information they find on Twitter into consideration, these gratifications found on the platform should be able to be implemented on the government’s new media. Having a chatbot on their webpage proves that the government through Gugus Tugas strives to provide a two-way communication with the public. However, despite knowing the high number of Twitter users in Indonesia, the task force of COVID-19 does not have an official Twitter account. Unlike the west Java provincial government who has an official account for Pikobar, the chatbot will only increase the asymmetry of communication between the government and the public. The chatbot also still has some shortcomings when users input an inquiry, it responds with “Mohon maaf, terjadi kendala teknis” or “Sorry, there seems to be technical difficulty”. On the other hand, the official Twitter account of Pikobar not only allows the government-public communication, but also highlights the agency-based gratification, where users not only receive information from the west Java government but also information from other users, forming an online community. Aside from its Twitter account, the Pikobar application also provides utility gratification (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979) which points to an all-in-one application by providing the numerical data of the Covid-19, but she can also read news, statements of West Java’s Governor, a self-check whether one is infected or not, etc., as perceived by informant #1.

Although social media is a convenient “one-stop shop” where users can find news, media contents, updates from close relatives, social media should not be the only source of information. Pearson (2020) acknowledged this convenience but also stressed upon the jumbled contents being on one platform. He explained that when news and entertainment can be found on the same page, users will be less likely to verify the source of information and check its credibility. As a result, the number of fake news and hoaxes being shared online may rise. As of August 2020, the Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Information have identified 1028 hoaxes spread online regarding Covid-19. This is a clear disadvantage when facing an international level crisis. Therefore, in order to make informed decisions from social media posts, including tweets, users must understand that the socio-cultural-technical context will influence the accuracy, timeliness, and relevance (Carley et al., 2015). In addition, Pearson (2020) highlighted that from the user’s standpoint, they must have a critical mindset and high media literacy to avoid this issue.

Bajaj et al. (2015) stated that PR practitioners often use SMS to disseminate information. However, they explained that the difficulty is that it is hard to trace who has been informed and therefore difficult to reach the right audience. Therefore, they suggest that practitioners should reach out and respond to relevant audiences that have
already read the SMS/MMS and to track where the SMS originated, which requires practitioners to collaborate with mobile companies who have the abilities to do so. This process, however, has been made much simpler with the help of Big Data. Big Data enables large volumes of data to be generated and accumulated at a very fast speed and continuous streaming of information (Punlumjeak et al., 2017). In this case, the researchers found that the data is derived from the chatbot on the Gugus Tugas’s website, since you would have to input your phone number to be able to chat with the bot. Ever since the initial attempt to chat with the bot, the researcher started receiving SMS on updates of the corona virus from Gugus Tugas.

Another form of new media mentioned by the informants, is news media such as Sky News, Jakarta post, and YouTube. Informant #2 accesses Sky News news portal as well as their YouTube channel to watch it on her smart TV. Sky News is based in the United Kingdom, presenting their news to readers in multiple forms of media. This demonstrates that the received gratification informant #2 acquired from Sky News is modality-based gratifications (Sundar, 2008). Modality-based gratification refers to the various multimedia forms of presenting an information which is significant for the cognitive process and includes gratifications like realism, coolness, novelty and the sense of ‘being there’. This statement is further supported by informant #2’s claim that she can focus and feel more immersed when she is watching the news on her smart TV, instead of only reading it on her mobile phone. Other forms of gratifications received from new media that is worth to mention is that of YouTube which provides the multimedia gratifications (Sundar, 2008) of news presenting in new media by providing the platform for independent accounts like Opini.id and Asumsi to present information in short videos, as well as the social interaction gratification (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979) received from Instagram that allows the sharing of information from online friends.

The gratifications found from informant’s use of new media should be able to serve as an insight to PR practitioners as to what users are looking for when selecting information in times of crisis, especially in the public sector. In order to avoid websites and mobile applications to be just another communication channel between organization and public, these gratifications can be taken in strategic planning when developing communication plans.

Conclusion

This research aims to explain which new media do users use to gain information in times of crisis and why they choose these forms of new media. A qualitative study with an in-depth interview was conducted with uses and gratifications theory as the framework. Despite the government’s efforts to develop websites and mobile applications as PR tools to reach the audience, it was found that users still tend to turn to alternative forms of information sources such as SNS and other news portals. There were many gratifications identified through the use of new media; entertainment, utility, multimedia, social interaction, agency-based gratification, navigability-based gratification, and modality-based gratifications (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979; Sundar, 2008). In the case of Covid-19, these gratifications should be taken into account when developing a website or mobile application, especially by the PR practitioners in the government. Although alternative forms of new media may be a practical “one-stop shop” of information, this raises concerns as users may not criticize the credibility of the source, as it may raise the number of hoaxes and misinformation spread online (Pearson, 2020).

Both the government agencies and the publics have their fair share of contributions that can be made in terms of their media production and consumption behavior. The government through their PR functions can focus on providing fast, honest, credible information through a two-way communication. But most importantly, despite the gratifications and convenience public receive by using new media, they must have a critical and skeptical mindset and a healthy media literacy when selecting information sources.

This exploratory did not aim to get a generalization of results, rather to explore what forms of new media used by the informants and understand the gratifications they seek, so that it can serve as an insight to the government’s communication strategy to disseminate information in times of crisis. This research is not without its flaws, therefore further research should be done in order to gain better understanding of the topic. Researchers can look further explore more dimensions of Sundar’s (2008) MAIN model, and also experiment on the media effects to the user’s stress level in times of crisis. Theoretically, researchers can also look at the relevance of uses and gratifications theory in the industry 4.0, especially with the presence of artificial intelligence utilized on social networking sites.
References


