

An Analysis of Media Agenda-Setting During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Indonesia: Implications for Disaster Preparedness, Response, And Policy

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream media shape public understanding and policy attention during health crises. In Indonesia's COVID-19 pandemic, how national online media prioritized disaster-management phases remains underexamined. To analyze agenda-setting patterns in Indonesian national online media and assess whether coverage emphasized mitigation/preparedness versus response/recovery, alongside accountability focus, framing, tone, and policy/health orientation. A quantitative content analysis of 16 news articles (2020–2021) from Kompas.com, Detik.com, Tempo.co, and CNNIndonesia.com coded for phase (mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery), accountability actors, framing (thematic/episodic), tone (positive/neutral/negative), and presence of health context and policy focus. Coverage concentrated on response (68.7%) and recovery (18.7%), with minimal attention to mitigation and preparedness (each 6.3%). Accountability was centralized on the national government (75%). Framing was entirely thematic (100%), and tone was predominantly neutral (62.5%). Most articles incorporated health context (87.5%) and a policy focus (93.7%). Indonesian online media displayed a reactive, state-centric agenda during COVID-19, privileging response/recovery over prevention-oriented phases. Strengthening media attention to mitigation and preparedness—and broadening accountability beyond the central government—could better support public risk education and resilience for future health emergencies.

Keywords: Agenda-setting, Disaster communication, Media framing, COVID-19; Indonesia, Mitigation and preparedness.

INTRODUCTION

Since the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in March 2020, Indonesia has faced significant challenges in public health and disaster policy. The Indonesian government officially declared COVID-19 a national non-natural disaster on April 13, 2020 (UNSDG, 2020). In crises, the media becomes the primary channel for conveying public information, shaping public perceptions, and exerting pressure on policymakers. Theoretically, agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) assumes that media do not reflect reality, but rather filter and shape it. Concentrating coverage on certain issues leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than others. Furthermore, framing (Iyengar, 1991) suggests that the way an issue is framed (episodic vs. thematic) influences who is considered responsible and how solutions are perceived. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia, previous research has shown that online media such as *Republika*, *Kompas*, *Detik*, *CNN Indonesia* more often highlight health issues (case numbers, deaths, vaccinations) and government policies rather than public education about preparedness (Yuniawan, 2023; Gosal & Salman, 2021). Framing research on Okezone and CNN also shows differences in tone: Okezone displays more negative framing, while CNN is more educational (Telkom Univ, 2023). The ability of mass media to set the agenda for public discussion is known as agenda-setting.

Agenda-setting influences public policy through coverage deliberately directed at specific events or issues, with the media encouraging policymakers to act and meet public demands. The media raises public awareness based on two assumptions: (1) the press and media do not merely reflect reality, but rather filter and shape it; and (2) media concentration on certain issues causes the public to perceive these issues as more important than others. During the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia, the media's agenda-setting role was evident through investigative coverage and headlines from influential online media outlets such as Kompas.com, Detik.com, Tempo.co, and CNNIndonesia.com, which generated widespread public attention and shaped consensus on shared priorities.

While the media has often been criticized for its handling of the pandemic—for example, for overemphasizing death tolls, amplifying fear, or not giving enough space to public health perspectives—the media still plays a historic role by encouraging governments to take swifter action. This triggers the public to reflect on their own community's vulnerability to health disasters. However, media coverage should place a balanced emphasis on mitigation and preparedness, not just response and recovery. Ideally, the media should play a consistent role throughout all phases of a disaster, helping policymakers and the public support evidence-based policies in health disaster management.

Furthermore, analytical reporting on current and proposed policies can enhance public understanding of their potential impacts. Therefore, understanding how the media gathers and distributes news is crucial for understanding and shaping agenda-setting priorities and public policy in the context of non-natural disasters. This study examines the agenda-setting of Indonesian media through an analysis of online news articles related to the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to explore how media agenda-setting supports public health disaster management practices (mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery), and to assess the extent to which the media contribute to the formation of policies that influence local and central government responses to the pandemic.

METHOD

This study uses articles from four major online news portals in Indonesia: Kompas.com, Detik.com, Tempo.co, and CNNIndonesia.com. These four media outlets were chosen because they represent national media outlets with broad reach, strong reputations, and significant influence in shaping public opinion and policy. Kompas.com and Detik.com consistently rank among the most frequently accessed news sites in Indonesia. Tempo.co is known for its tradition of investigative journalism, while CNNIndonesia.com represents global media outlets with strong national penetration. The combination of these four media outlets is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of Indonesian media agenda-setting during the COVID-19 pandemic. To identify news articles, researchers utilized the search engines of each online portal using a combination of keywords such as "COVID-19," "corona," "pandemic," "PSBB," and "PPKM" searched in the titles and leads of news articles. The Indonesian government officially declared COVID-19 a national non-natural disaster on April 13, 2020, but this research period began earlier, namely from March 2020 when the first case was announced, until December 2021 to capture the dynamics and changes in news themes as policies and pandemic responses developed.

The data collection process in this study was carried out through content analysis of online news articles from four Indonesian national media, namely *Kompas.com*, *Detik.com*, *Tempo.co*, and *CNNIndonesia.com*. Two specially trained coders were assigned to conduct the coding process. The principal investigator first explained the research objectives, provided methodological guidance, and trained the coders using a number of sample articles. These sample articles served as practice materials to demonstrate how news content should be analyzed and classified into predetermined categories. After the training phase was completed, all articles meeting the criteria were entered into a database using data processing software (Microsoft Excel/Access) for systematic and easy analysis.

During the analysis process, each article was coded based on specific categories. First, articles were mapped into primary topics according to disaster management principles: mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. Two additional categories death/injury and damage were added to capture the diversity of emerging content. Articles that predominantly addressed a single topic, such as the government's response to the pandemic, were categorized as primary, while articles that addressed more than one topic were recorded as secondary.

Article identification was also recorded, including the name of the media outlet, publication date, placement within the news portal (whether published on the main channel or a thematic channel such as national, health, or economic), and article length, measured by word count. Framing was also analyzed by distinguishing between episodic and thematic framing. Episodic framing focuses on individual cases or victim experiences, while thematic framing highlights policy or systemic issues. Articles that combined the two were recorded as combined. From a public health perspective, thematic framing is considered more important because it can direct public attention to collective needs and preventative policies.

Next, articles were reviewed from a health perspective, including whether they included quotes from medical personnel, discussions about illnesses and injuries, or information from health institutions. Articles were also analyzed for any policy aspects, such as the creation, implementation, or evaluation of public policies related to the

pandemic, such as large-scale social restrictions (PSBB), community activity restrictions (PPKM), or mass vaccinations.

Another important dimension is accountability. Articles were mapped to determine which actors were most frequently cited as responsible. Accountability categories included individuals or families, local organizations (both nonprofit and private), local governments, and the central government. If an article did not mention a specific actor, it was coded as "not applicable." In cases where an article cited more than one actor, all parties were recorded.

Finally, the tone of the news coverage was examined to determine how the media portrayed the named actors. Positive articles typically emphasized success or support, while negative articles focused more on criticism or condemnation. Articles that were difficult to align with either pole were recorded as neutral. Furthermore, article prominence was analyzed by examining their placement on news portals, whether they appeared on the main page, editorial channels, or other sections.

RESULTS

Of the 16 articles analyzed, the majority of Indonesian online media coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) focused on the response phase (11 articles, or 68.7%). Coverage of recovery came in second (3 articles, or 18.7%). Meanwhile, mitigation and preparedness received little attention, appearing only once each (6.3%). This distribution suggests that the media functioned more as a transmitter of emergency policy information and crisis updates, rather than an agent of public education for long-term prevention. For example, Kompas.com covered the first COVID-19 case (March 2020) and the announcement of Emergency PPKM (Emergency PPKM) (July 2021) from the perspective of the central government's response, while coverage of mitigation only appeared in the context of Jakarta's Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB) regulations (April 2020).

All articles in the sample were analyzed using thematic framing (100%). This means the media focused more on the pandemic as a macro event involving state policies, statistical data, and regulations, rather than presenting micro-narratives or episodic framing that depicts the experiences of individuals, families, or communities. The absence of episodic framing limits public understanding of the pandemic's human dimension. For example, news about the surge in deaths in July 2021 was presented as national figures without featuring personal stories of victims, healthcare workers, or affected families. Most articles positioned the central government as the primary actor responsible (12 articles, or 75%). Regional governments appeared in only two articles (12.5%), while individuals, families, communities, or non-governmental organizations were not highlighted at all as primary actors. This confirms that Indonesian media, in the context of the pandemic, framed the issue as a state responsibility, with the President and relevant ministries dominant. CNNIndonesia's coverage, for example, highlighted "Central Java, East Java, and Jakarta Contribute the Most Deaths" but continued to attribute this to central government policies, rather than local capacity.

Tone analysis showed that the majority of articles were neutral (10 articles, 62.5%). Positive articles (5 articles, 31.2%) typically related to narratives of government success, such as the announcement of national vaccinations (Kompas.com, January 2021) or the decline in cases after PPKM (Restrictions on Public Activities) (Detik.com, July 2021). Only one article (6.3%) was negative, highlighting the COVID-19 death crisis. This suggests that while the media plays a role as a conduit for information, its watchdog role or policy criticism is relatively limited. Most articles (14 of 16, 87.5%) included health context in the form of case data, deaths, or quotes from medical authorities. Nearly all articles (15 of 16, 93.7%) focused on policies such as large-scale social restrictions (PSBB), PPKM, and vaccination. Thus, the media emphasized government regulations rather than community-based approaches or individual-based education.

Similar to the findings of Barnes et al. (2008) in their study of Hurricane Katrina coverage in the US, Indonesian media also exhibited a more reactive than preventive pattern. The dominant focus on the response and recovery phases indicates that the media was present primarily after the crisis had occurred, rather than before. Mitigation and preparedness messages, crucial for building community resilience, received less space. This had significant consequences. The public received less education on simple but vital matters, such as how to establish family protocols, proper mask use, or emergency communication strategies at the community level. Instead, the public was "inundated" with information about PPKM policies, case numbers, and government regulations. The dominance of thematic framing suggests that the media acted more as a policy mouthpiece than a risk communication agent. The pandemic was seen as a national issue to be resolved by the government, rather than as a social event requiring the active participation of individuals and communities. The absence of episodic framing implies a loss of empathy and closeness. However, individual experiences—stories of health workers, patients, or victims' families—could strengthen public awareness and increase compliance with health protocols. With 75% of articles naming the central government as the primary actor, the media reinforced the state-centric narrative. This pattern makes it seem as if public responsibility is "pulled" toward the center of power, thus weakening the public's

collective conscience. In contrast to the findings of Barnes et al. (2008) in the US, where the media highlighted the failures of various levels of government (local, state, and federal), in Indonesia, coverage is more monolithic: the center determines everything.

A neutral tone dominated, with positive insertions on vaccination and the decline in cases. Only a few articles criticized policies or highlighted government weaknesses. This could be interpreted as media avoiding confrontation in crises, or as a result of ownership factors and political-economic relations between media outlets and the government. Consequently, the media's role as a watchdog in a democracy is less than optimal. These results confirm that the Indonesian media has not maximized its role in public health disaster risk communication. According to WHO guidelines (2020), risk communication must be consistent, clear, evidence-based, and inclusive across all phases. However, the media dominated the crisis and recovery phases, while paying less attention to the mitigation and preparedness phases. If this pattern continues, the public will remain reactive, awaiting government direction without building their own and their communities' capacities. This is dangerous for preparedness for future crises, whether pandemics or natural disasters.

CONCLUSION

Indonesian national online media coverage during COVID-19 (2020–2021) demonstrated a reactive and state-centric agenda: response/recovery dominated, accountability was centralized in the central government, thematic framing was entirely prevalent, and the tone was largely neutral. Despite a strong focus on health policy and context, the portion of prevention (mitigation/preparedness) remained minimal, resulting in a suboptimal risk education function. Going forward, editorial staff are advised to: increase prevention and preparedness content, diversify sources, combine thematic and episodic framing, and oversee the implementation of indicator-based policies. This approach has the potential to improve public risk literacy and resilience in the face of future health emergencies.

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