

The Dynamics of Local Government Crisis Communication in the Post-Truth Era: A Case Study of The Land and Building Tax Increase Controversy in Cirebon City

Heru Sulistiyo^{1*}, Kamal Alamsyah²

¹Fakultas Politik Pemerintahan, IPDN, Jawa Barat, Indonesia

²Pascasarjana Universitas Pasundan, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author E-mail: herusulistiyo@ipdn.ac.id

Abstract

This study analyzes the dynamics of public policy communication in the post-truth era, using the case study of the Land and Building Tax (PBB) increase controversy in Cirebon City in 2024. This study aims to identify government communication strategies, explore the role of media and disinformation, and uncover new findings related to the adaptation of government communication amidst the crisis. A qualitative-descriptive approach was used, using critical discourse analysis techniques for policy documents, online media coverage, and official government statements. Key findings indicate that the government's communication strategy was initially reactive and tended to use a one-way model (Public Information and Two-Way Asymmetrical), which was ineffective in dampening public sentiment. However, public pressure forced the government to reactively shift to a two-way symmetrical communication model, which was realized through the revocation of the Mayoral Regulation (Perwali). This shift occurred not as a proactive choice, but rather as a defensive response to the crisis triggered by the post-truth environment. This report recommends that the government adopt a more proactive and adaptive communication model from the outset to prevent crisis escalation and build sustainable public trust.

Keywords: Public Policy Communication, Post-Truth, Crisis Communication, Land and Building Tax (PBB), Local Government, Communication Strategy, Policy Adaptation.

INTRODUCTION

In the post-truth era, public policies produced by local governments often spark controversy because the public is more influenced by emotional narratives than objective data (Susanti et al., 2020). In situations like this, the principles of crisis communication

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become highly relevant. In this context, crisis communication in local governments presents a crucial challenge, especially when the public responds to controversial policies. Therefore, such policymaking processes require effective communication coordination, as without transparency and adequate public participation, policy publications can be misunderstood by the public.

Effective public communication is a key asset for government agencies in building public trust, increasing citizen engagement, and establishing a positive image (Malik, 2018). This process plays a crucial role in the success of policy implementation, as without clear communication, even well-designed policies can fail to achieve their objectives (Aulia & Kusumasari, 2022). Public trust is invaluable social capital, enabling stable and efficient governance to run smoothly (Malik, 2018). As communication channels become more open and public involvement increases, the government is expected to listen to public aspirations and input to design policies that better align with the community's real needs (Malik, 2018). However, the lack of public information disclosure by local governments is one consequence of citizens' lack of understanding of the various efforts undertaken by local governments to implement public transparency (Setiaman et al., 2013).

Mass media and new media are key instruments of political communication, accelerating the dissemination of policy information to the public (Wahid, 2018). Media (including social media) enables the government to reach a wider audience, but also facilitates the spread of dominant narratives that can massively shape public opinion. Collaborative communication between government and non-government actors using crisis communication principles, such as calls to action, clarity of messages, empathy, corrective action, and transparency, can strengthen public trust and address policy misinformation (Hasanah, 2023). The role of the media further blurs the boundaries between the public and private spheres. Private spaces, such as boarding rooms, can be transformed into open spaces for public information through media activities (Wahyudi and Nugroho, 2022).

However, the dynamics of public policy communication face significant challenges in the digital era, where the post-truth phenomenon has fundamentally changed the information landscape. This era is characterized by conditions in which

objective facts have less influence in shaping public opinion than emotions and personal beliefs (Kemenkumham, 2025; Setneg, 2025). This post-truth concept is not merely a theory, but a proven reality in the Indonesian political context, as seen in the 2019 Presidential Election and various other social issues (Kuen & Kuen, 2020; Juditha & Darmawan, 2018; Heryanto, 2018; Robi'ah, 2019). In this environment, inaccurate or completely false information can be easily accepted and disseminated if it aligns with a person's pre-existing biases and beliefs (Kemenkumham, 2025). This is exacerbated by the rapid spread of disinformation through social media, which often spreads faster than official clarifications from ministries or government agencies (Setneg, 2025; Kuen & Kuen, 2020). The government is now faced not only with fact-based criticism but also with narratives that fundamentally reject the truth, demanding a much more adaptive communication strategy (Setneg, 2025).

A relevant and recent case study to analyze this dynamic is the controversy surrounding the increase in Land and Building Tax (PBB) in Cirebon City in early 2024. The significant increase in Land and Building Tax (PBB) in Cirebon City in 2024 sparked controversy and strong public resistance. This increase was triggered by the enactment of Regional Regulation No. 1 of 2024 and Mayoral Regulation No. 9 of 2024. Residents complained about unreasonable bill increases, with some cases indicating increases exceeding 1,000%.

The unrest among the Cirebon community led to the formation of the Paguyuban Pelangi Cirebon. They took various measures, from filing objections with the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), demonstrations, to legal action by filing a judicial review. This action was also accompanied by letters of objection sent to the President and other relevant government institutions, demonstrating the seriousness of this issue for the public. In response to public pressure, the Cirebon City Government, along with the DPRD and the West Java Provincial Government, finally evaluated the policy. The Governor of West Java even.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Policy Communication Theory

Based on the problem description above, the author begins by providing an explanation of public policy and public policy communication theory. Public policy is a series of actions or activities proposed by an individual, group, or government within a specific environment, given the existing obstacles and opportunities (Winarno, 2007). Public policy is a domain of activity formulated by the government or public officials, whether implemented or not implemented by the government or other parties, with the aim of achieving specific goals (Defi, 2015). Therefore, public policy is a set of actions formulated by the government or public officials, which can involve individuals or groups, to respond to opportunities and obstacles in a specific environment to achieve common goals.

Public policy communication can be understood as the process of conveying information, ideas, and feelings from policymakers (communicators) to the public (communicates) to achieve specific goals (Malik, 2018). In the context of policy implementation, clear and consistent communication is essential (Ramadani, 2019). Various theoretical models exist that explain government communication practices. These models are often categorized based on their purpose, whether to disseminate information one-way or to foster a two-way dialogue (Kusumanegara, 2010).

One-Way Communication Models include the Publicity-Press Agency Model and the Public Information Model (Kusumanegara, 2010). The Publicity-Press Agency Model aims solely for publicity, where information is conveyed unilaterally to create a positive image without regard for feedback (Kusumanegara, 2010). An example is a press release managed by government public relations for dissemination in the media or on official websites (Kusumanegara, 2010). Meanwhile, the Public Information Model, although also one-way, seeks to disseminate information accurately and is not persuasive, as if government public relations were acting as journalists (Kusumanegara, 2010). Both models demonstrate a top-down approach, with the government playing a dominant role as the source of information.

In contrast, the Two-Way Communication Model emphasizes the importance of public feedback (Kusumanegara, 2010). The Two-Way Asymmetrical Model aims to

persuade or influence the public to act in accordance with the organization's or government's wishes (Kusumanegara, 2010). While feedback is listened to, the goal is not to change policy, but rather to craft a more persuasive message. This model is implemented through collaboration with mass media and online platforms, with the hope of eliciting feedback for re-dissemination (Kusumanegara, 2010). Finally, the Two-Way Symmetrical Model is the ideal of policy communication. This model seeks to achieve mutual understanding and mutual negotiation between the government and the public, where both parties can change their views and positions (Kusumanegara, 2010).

In practice, these models are not always implemented in their purest form (Kusumanegara, 2010). Often, governments use a mix of models, or even switch from one model to another in response to evolving situations. The availability of open and easily accessible communication channels for the public enables this shift (Malik, 2018; Cirebon City Government, 2025).

The Concept of the Post-Truth Era

In the post-truth era, public policies produced by local governments often spark controversy because the public is more influenced by emotional narratives than objective data. In this context, the crisis of local government communication becomes a crucial challenge, especially when the public responds to controversial policies. The post-truth phenomenon refers to a condition in which emotions and personal beliefs have a greater influence in shaping public opinion than objective facts (Kemenkumham, 2025; Setneg, 2025). This creates an environment where the line between truth and lies, fiction and non-fiction, becomes very thin (Kemenkumham, 2025). In this era, people tend to prefer to confirm information received rather than seek the actual truth (Kuen & Kuen, 2020). This can trigger a widespread crisis of trust in traditional institutions, including the government and the media (Setneg, 2025; Kuen & Kuen, 2020).

The impact of post-truth is particularly pronounced in the domain of public policy. Disinformation can spread rapidly through social media platforms, often with narratives exploited for specific purposes, such as identity politics (Heryanto, 2018; Kuen & Kuen, 2020). Studies show that sensitive narratives related to religion, politics, and identity are often used as tools to spread disinformation (Kuen & Kuen, 2020). The challenge for the

government is how to counter these narratives that manipulate public perception (Setneg, 2025). The required strategy extends beyond factual clarification to building a strong, transparent, and proactive counternarrative to fill the public space with a credible narrative (Setneg, 2025).

Key Actors and Roles in Policy Communication

This research uses a qualitative-descriptive approach (Moleong, 2006; Subarsono, 2011). This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to conduct in-depth analysis of complex policy communication phenomena, rather than simply measuring numerical data (Moleong, 2006). Using a descriptive approach, this study aims to describe and interpret how the communication process of the PBB increase policy in Cirebon City occurred naturally, including the interactions between actors and the dynamics of the emerging narratives (Moleong, 2006).

Data in this study were collected through two main techniques: first, document analysis. This involved collecting and reviewing relevant formal documents, particularly Mayoral Regulation (Perwali) Number 9 of 2024 concerning Procedures for Regional Tax Collection. This document served as the formal starting point for the policy controversy. In addition, other supporting documents, such as official news reports from government portals and press releases, were also analyzed (Cirebon Mayoral Regulation, 2024; Cirebon City Government, 2024; West Java Regional Revenue Agency, 2025; Cirebon City Regulation, 2024). Second, Media Content Analysis. Collecting and analyzing news reports from online media and social media content related to the issue of the increase in property tax (PBB) in Cirebon (RRI, 2024). Data collected included headlines, news content, narratives used by reporters and sources, and responses presented.

The collected data was analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is a method that allows researchers to analyze not only text but also the social and political context behind it (Sumarti, 2015; Eriyanto, 2001). This analysis will examine how narratives about UN policy are constructed by the government and the media, as well as how these narratives are produced and contested by various parties (Sumarti, 2015; Eriyanto, 2001).

The data analysis steps follow Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which is carried out continuously until data saturation is reached (Moleong, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The stages include: first, data reduction, which summarizes data collected from documents and media into relevant and significant units of information related to policy communication (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Second, data display, which presents the reduced data in visual formats such as tables and figures to facilitate understanding of patterns of relationships between events (Miles & Huberman, 1994). and third, drawing conclusions (Conclusion Drawing/Verification): Drawing conclusions based on the patterns found and validating them by comparing various data sources and relevant theories (Moleong, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

RESEARCH METHOD

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RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Chronology of Policy and Public Response

The issue of the Land and Building Tax (PBB) increase in Cirebon City in 2024 stems from the enactment of Regional Regulation Number 1 of 2024 concerning Rural and Urban Land and Building Tax (PBB-P2), signed by the Acting Mayor of Cirebon, and Mayoral Regulation (Perwali) Number 9 of 2024 (Cirebon City Mayoral Regulation, 2024). These regulations formed the basis for the significant increase in PBB in the 2024 tax year (Merdeka, 2024; KPPOD, 2024). Consequently, several residents complained about the unreasonable increase in tax bills. For example, a resident named Darma Suryapranata, who previously paid Rp 6.2 million in PBB in 2023, received a bill of up to Rp 65 million in 2024, an increase of over 1,000 percent (Detik, 2024). Similar cases were experienced by other residents whose property tax (PBB) bills soared from hundreds of thousands to millions of rupiah in a single year (KPPOD, 2024).

This situation caused public unrest and prompted the formation of a collective movement. Through the Cirebon Rainbow Association, residents filed a complaint with the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) in May 2024, then resumed demonstrations in June 2024 after the government's response was deemed inadequate (Merdeka, 2024). They even pursued legal action, filing a judicial review of the Regional Regulation and sending letters of objection to the President, the Ministry of Home Affairs, and the Supreme Audit Agency (BPK) in early 2025 (Merdeka, 2024).

In response, the Cirebon City Government, along with the DPRD and the West Java Provincial Government, conducted an evaluation. West Java Governor Dedi Mulyadi requested that the drastic increase in property tax be revoked, and the Mayor of Cirebon expressed his readiness to readjust the policy (Merdeka, 2024). Ultimately, through mediation, the Cirebon City Government revoked the mayoral regulation that had been the basis for the 1,000 percent increase in property tax (PBB) and adjusted it to a 400 percent increase (DDTC News, 2025). Furthermore, starting in 2026, the PBB rate will be returned to the 2023 level, hopefully ensuring fiscal justice for the community (Suara Cirebon, 2025).

The issue of the PBB increase in Cirebon City illustrates how regional fiscal policies can generate public resistance when deemed disproportionate and burdensome. This demonstrates that the government's persuasive communication strategy has failed to change public perception, influenced by emotional narratives and circulating figures, such as the claim of a "1,000%" increase that made headlines (RRI, 2024; Bapenda Jabar, 2025). Therefore, a public information transparency policy is needed that aims to empower citizens to become partners in criticizing and supporting government policies. Policy implementers need to provide adequate information to prevent the public from being easily trapped by conflicting issues (Setiaman et al., 2013).

Based on the chronology of the issues above, a table 1 can be presented showing the causal relationship between government actions and public responses, ultimately forcing policy change.

Table 1. Chronology of Cirebon City's PBB Policies and Communications in 2024

Date of Incident	Actors Involved	Policy Events	Initial Communication Strategy	Public Response	The final result
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May 2, 2024	Cirebon City Government	Issuance of Cirebon Mayoral Regulation No. 9 of 2024 concerning Procedures for Collecting Regional Taxes and Regional Regulation No. 1 of 2024 concerning Rural and Urban Land and Building Tax (PBB-P2).	Initially it was formal.	Public complaints, protests, and the narrative of a "1000% increase" are widespread.	The mayoral regulation became the starting point of the crisis.
May - August, 2024	Government, Society, Media	The government launched a PBB discount program and urged citizens to take advantage of it.	Two-Way Asymmetrical Model (persuasion). Accommodating complaints with incentives, not by changing core policies.	Protests continue, student demonstrations, the narrative of "inadequacy" is dominant.	Failure of persuasive strategies.
August, 2024	Cirebon City Government, Community, DPRD, Governor of West Java (mediator)	The Mayor of Cirebon approved the revocation of the 2024 Mayoral Regulation and returned the PBB rates to the 2023 levels.	Two-Way Symmetrical Model (total accommodation). The government listens to aspirations and changes core policies.	The protests subsided, people felt heard.	The mayor's regulations were revoked, indicating forced communication adaptations.

Communication Dynamics in the Post-Truth Era

A thorough analysis of this case shows that communication dynamics extend beyond the delivery of information, but are also strongly influenced by the post-truth phenomenon. The public narrative of a "1000% increase" (West Java Regional Revenue Agency, 2025) elicited a far stronger emotional sentiment than the actual policy itself. This narrative, while perhaps not universally accurate, successfully mobilized the masses because it directly addressed people's financial concerns (RRI, 2024). This aligns with the

post-truth concept, where emotions and personal beliefs (e.g., feelings of burden) take precedence over objective facts (Kemenkumham, 2025).

Mass media and social media play a central role in reinforcing this narrative. News focused on public grievances and threats of demonstrations (RRI, 2024) created an environment that reinforced the narrative of "the people are suffering" and "the government is unjust." This phenomenon is an application of framing theory (Heryanto, 2018), where the media selects certain facts (citizens' complaints, tax increase figures) to construct a specific narrative framework. In the digital era, this news spreads rapidly, making emotional narratives more dominant and difficult to refute with structured factual clarification (Setneg, 2025). The government faces the challenge of not only providing accurate information but also countering narratives that have become entrenched in public perception (Setneg, 2025). Therefore, by utilizing digital media (e-government and social media), the Cirebon City Government can disseminate information about the proposed PBB increase to the public, hold online question-and-answer forums, and engage with residents through real-time information updates. Ensuring public feedback (public involvement) is also crucial for policies to be perceived as participatory (Yovinus, 2018).

The post-truth era is characterized by a situation in which public opinion is shaped more by emotions, sentiments, and viral narratives than by objective facts. In the context of the controversy surrounding the Land and Building Tax (PBB) increase in Cirebon City, this dynamic was clearly evident when rumors of a "1,000 percent" tax increase spread widely on social media. This narrative, while not entirely accurate, shaped public perception more quickly than official government clarifications. This demonstrates that in a post-truth communication ecosystem, facts often lose out to emotional narratives (McIntyre, 2018).

This phenomenon illustrates that local governments are no longer in a dominant position to control the flow of information. Social media has disrupted traditional communication patterns, accelerating the distribution of information while simultaneously increasing the space for disinformation and hoaxes. The government's slow and one-sided persuasion-oriented response, driven by a two-way, asymmetrical

model, ultimately proved inadequate, as the public had already formed opinions based on emotional sentiments.

The government's failure in the initial communication phase demonstrated its unpreparedness for the characteristics of public communication in the digital age. Delays in clarification, minimal public involvement, and a lack of transparency exacerbated the crisis. As a result, public pressure continued to mount, leading to demonstrations, objections, and even judicial review. At this point, the government was forced to shift to a two-way symmetrical model, where communication involves listening to public aspirations, negotiating, and ultimately revoking controversial policies.

This emphasizes that in the post-truth era, the communication crisis is not just about content, but also about speed, empathy, and public participation in policy dialogue. Public policy communication must transform from a mere instrument of persuasion to a collaborative tool that involves the public from the very beginning of policy formulation. Otherwise, the government will always be on the defensive, merely reacting to crises that have already escalated.

Thus, the dynamics of communication in the post-truth era require the government to adopt a more proactive, adaptive, and participatory communication strategy to anticipate disinformation and maintain policy legitimacy and public trust.

Communication Transformation from Asymmetric to Reactive Symmetry

This is the core finding of this study. Initially, the Cirebon City Government's response to the PBB crisis reflected an asymmetric model. By offering PBB discounts, the government attempted to influence the public to continue accepting the existing policy (Cirebon City Government, 2024). The communication goal was one-way persuasion, encouraging the public to pay the increased taxes with the incentive of relief (RRI, 2024). However, this strategy failed.

The failure of this asymmetric strategy, demonstrated by persistent demonstrations and public opposition (Cirebon City Council, 2024), forced the government to change its approach. Ultimately, the Mayor of Cirebon, after mediation with the Governor of West Java, agreed to revoke the controversial Mayoral Regulation (Perwalian) (West Java Regional Revenue Agency, 2025). The decision to completely revoke the policy was an

extreme measure that demonstrated a shift from persuasion to accommodation. This is a manifestation of a two-way symmetrical communication model, where the government ultimately adjusted its position completely to achieve a common understanding and restore public trust.

This shift was not a proactive choice, but rather a reactive response to the uncontrolled escalation of the crisis. It was a shift forced by strong public pressure in a post-truth environment (Cirebon City Council, 2024). These findings provide new insights: in the post-truth era, governments must be prepared to communicate symmetrically from the outset. Otherwise, they risk being forced to do so in the midst of a crisis, at a much higher political cost. This shift demonstrates how power dynamics in the digital age can fundamentally alter policy communication practices at the local level, making them more vulnerable and reactive.

These findings can be illustrated conceptually in Figure 1, which shows the flow of policy communication, initially straightforward, then forced to shift toward an adaptive and responsive approach due to pressures from the post-truth environment.

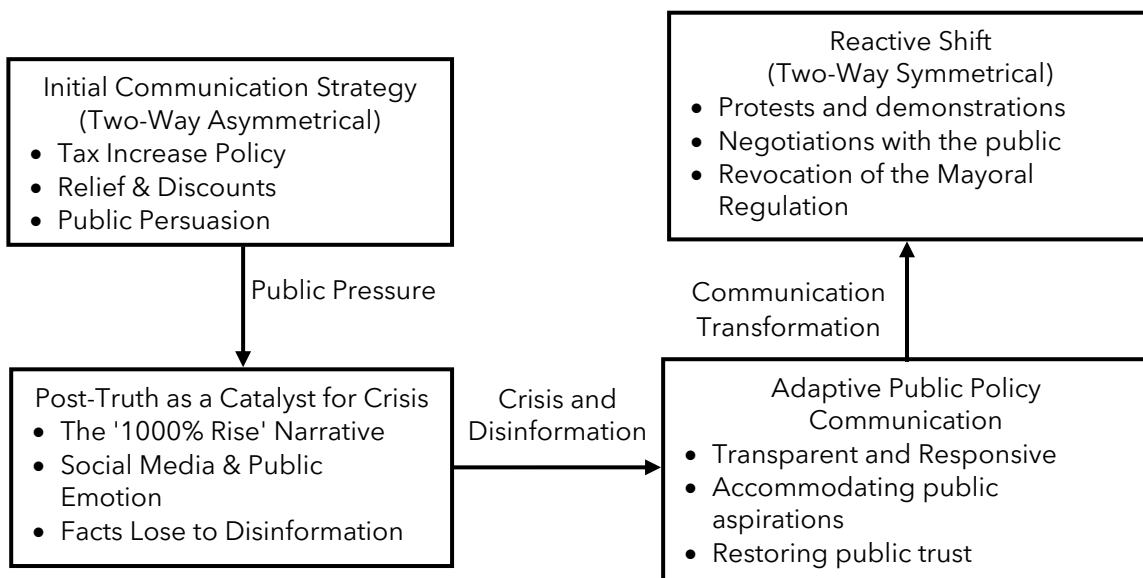


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Adaptive Public Policy Communication in the Post-Truth Era

This conceptual model visualizes the research's key findings: the shift in government communication strategies resulting from pressures from the post-truth

environment and the resulting crises. This diagram demonstrates that public policy communication in the digital age is no longer a static and linear process. Instead, it is an adaptive and reactive process driven by external dynamics.

The following is a step-by-step explanation of the model:

1. Initial Communication Strategy (Two-Way Asymmetrical): In the initial phase, the Cirebon City Government implemented the PBB (land tax) increase policy and responded to public complaints using an asymmetrical two-way communication model. The goal was to persuade the public to accept the existing policy. This communication took the form of launching PBB (land tax) relief and discount programs and encouraging the public to take advantage of them. Although the government listened to public feedback, the goal was not to change the substance of the policy itself, but rather to shift public perception to align with the government's wishes.
2. Catalyst and Pressure (Post-Truth): Amidst these persuasive efforts, the post-truth phenomenon emerged, which catalyzed the crisis. The public narrative of a "1000% increase" spread rapidly through social media, ignoring objective facts and relying more on the emotional sentiments of a burdened public. This created an environment where the line between truth and falsehood became very thin, and the public tended to seek justification for their emotions rather than factual truth. This disinformation spread faster than official government clarification, rendering the government's initial communication efforts ineffective.
3. Reactive Shift (Two-Way Symmetrical): The failure of this asymmetrical strategy, demonstrated by the continuing protests and demonstrations by the public and students, forced the government to drastically change its approach. This shift was not a proactive choice, but rather a reactive response to an uncontrollable crisis. In this phase, the government shifted to a symmetrical, two-way communication model, where the primary goal was to reach a common understanding and negotiate with the public. The manifestation of this shift was the Mayor of Cirebon's decision to revoke the controversial Mayoral Regulation (Perwali), returning the property tax rate to its previous level.

Overall, this model highlights that in the post-truth era, governments can no longer rely solely on one-way communication to convey policy. Strong public pressure, accelerated by disinformation in digital media, can force governments to adopt a more transparent and adaptive communication model, involving full accommodation of public aspirations, to restore public trust. This suggests that modern policy communication practices must be proactive and ready to adapt to the unpredictable dynamics of the digital environment. And in the post-truth era, policy communication can no longer rely on traditional, static approaches. Public sentiment, accelerated by social media and disinformation, serves as a powerful catalyst. The success or failure of communication is

measured by the government's ability to adapt from an asymmetric approach (attempting to control the narrative) to a symmetric one (accommodating aspirations) in a timely manner.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that public policy communication in the post-truth era faces complex and multidimensional challenges. The controversial increase in property tax (PBB) in Cirebon City serves as an ideal case study to illustrate this dynamic. The communication strategies initially implemented by the Cirebon City Government were reactive and asymmetrical, such as offering PBB discounts, aimed at persuading the public without changing the substance of the policy. However, this strategy proved ineffective because it failed to counter the emotional narratives and disinformation that had taken root within the community.

A novel finding of this research is that the failure of the asymmetric strategy forced the government to shift to a reactive, symmetrical communication approach. This change was realized through the decision to revoke the Mayoral Regulation (Perwali), an action that demonstrated total accommodation to public demands. This phenomenon demonstrates that in the digital age, governments can no longer act solely as one-way communicators. Instead, they must be prepared to engage in equal and adaptive dialogue, even if that means changing established policies. Public trust cannot be built with one-sided narratives, but rather through concrete actions that demonstrate a willingness to listen and respond.

Based on these findings, this study recommends several practical steps for local governments to improve the effectiveness of public policy communication. First, Improving Digital Literacy, namely the Government needs to prioritize improving digital literacy for both its apparatus and the public to distinguish between facts and disinformation. Second, Transparency and Openness, namely building communication platforms that enable continuous two-way dialogue, not just a one-way channel. Programs such as "One Day with Citizen" and "Sapa Warga" are good examples of proactive initiatives that should be integrated into the entire policy cycle. Third, Proactive

Issue Management, namely integrating public sentiment analysis and social media as part of the policy formulation and implementation process, not just as a crisis response tool.

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