

Spokespersons, Public Communication, and Food Safety: Legal Perspectives on Crisis Communication in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT: Food safety remains a critical challenge in Indonesia due to food adulteration, contamination, and systemic regulatory weaknesses. Government spokespersons play a vital role in managing public communication during food safety crises, providing timely, accurate, and credible information to mitigate public anxiety and misinformation. This study examines the communicative role of government spokespersons in Indonesia, highlighting institutional constraints, inter-agency coordination issues, and the influence of social media on public communication strategies. Using a qualitative doctrinal legal research approach, the study analyzes laws, regulations, guidelines, and comparative examples from other jurisdictions to identify gaps and propose improvements. Findings indicate that fragmented responsibilities among food safety agencies and the rapid spread of hoaxes undermine public trust, while consolidating authority under a single agency and adopting proactive, coordinated social media strategies can enhance risk communication and crisis management. The study provides practical and legal insights for strengthening government communication to ensure food safety and protect public health.

KEYWORDS: Food Safety, Government Spokesperson, Public Communication, Social Media

I. INTRODUCTION

Ensuring food safety is still becoming a challenge in Indonesia. The fraudulent practices and negligence by food manufacturers put the public health at risk (Vyralakshmi and Jayasheela,2017). In Indonesia, usually, food becomes harmful because it was adulterated and contaminated. Food adulteration is an economically motivated act which usually done by adding low quality or even dangerous materials to increase the weight, or to improve its appearance to attract the consumers (Everstine,Spink,Kennedy,2013). While food contamination commonly is the consequence of poor quality control. When food is not handled properly, it can be contaminated with microorganisms, bacteria, or germs which can make food becomes harmful to consume.

In Indonesia, food adulteration typically involves 'bulking up', the misuse of food additives, and the incorporation of harmful substances. Food 'bulking up' is the act of mixing food with sub-quality ingredients to increase the weight to make the product have a higher value. The example of food bulking is the adulteration of cow's milk with coconut milk, coconut water, and corn starch (Trimadya, Hardjomidjojo, and Anggraeni,2018). While the use of food additives is permitted, as long as it is not used excessively as it can lead to dangerous risk if it is not used appropriately. For example, adulterating honey beyond the permitted limit can make it harmful, especially for vulnerable populations such as children and people with diabetes. The last type of food adulteration- the use of dangerous ingredients also can easily found in the domestic market. Usually, food manufacturers use prohibited materials to make the food have longer shelf-life and also to improve the appearance of it (Collins,1993). The example of this wrongful act is the use of formalin in tofu and wet noodle. Formalin is a component of many antiseptics, deodorizing agents, fumigants and anti-wrinkle treatment for fabrics (Aggarwal and Garg,1983). Long-term exposure to formalin can be harmful to human health due to its carcinogenic properties, which can promote the growth of cancer cells. (Sikanna,2016).

Food contamination is also a serious public health issue, as it can lead to food-borne illnesses. In ten months, 11.000 cases of students have reportedly suffered food poisoning associated with free school lunch-a program launched by the Indonesian government (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) (BBC News Indonesia,2025). These incidence have been linked to a combination of systemic food-safety challenges. Those are inadequate hygiene practices in food handling, improper temperature control and storage, and long distribution process which heighten the risk of contamination. Moreover, large production volumes may also contributes to the emergence of food-borne illnesses.

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Food safety is a basic human need that can significantly influence a country's social, economic, and political stability. Food safety incidents such as food-borne illnesses often cause public concern and can trigger instability if not managed effectively through clear and well-directed public communication. Within this context, the role of government spokesperson becomes crucial. As the official voice of state institutions, the spokesperson is responsible for delivering timely, accurate, and credible information to the public while balancing scientific uncertainty, media pressure, and the rapid spread of misinformation- particularly on social media. Government spokesperson is hoped to coordinate messages across agencies, reassure community, and guide as well as mitigate the calm the public.

However, despite this critical function, the communicative role of government spokesperson in Indonesia's food safety incidents remains understudied, especially in terms of institutional constraints, interagency coordination, and the evolving digital communication environment. This study seeks to address the gap by examining how government spokesperson respond during food safety crises in Indonesia.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is guided by the following research questions, which aim to clarify the central issues explored in this investigation.

1. How do government spokespersons in Indonesia communicate risks and uncertainties during food safety incidents?
2. How effectively do spokespersons coordinate information across government agencies (e.g., BPOM, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture) when responding to food safety incidents?
3. How does social media ecosystems influence the public communication strategies of government spokespersons in Indonesia?

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in doctrinal legal research to examine the role of government spokespersons in managing food safety incidents in Indonesia. The doctrinal approach enables a systematic analysis of laws, regulations, and institutional frameworks regulating food safety communication.

The study relies entirely on secondary data, comprising primary legal materials, such as statutes, government regulations, and official guidelines, secondary legal material including academic articles, books, experts commentaries, and policy reports, and tertiary legal materials namely dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and indexes.

Data was collected through desktop study and continued by examining them to identify the weaknesses of government spokesperson in Indonesia. This research also involves a comparative study by looking into other jurisdiction's strategy in public communication to find possible recommendations to improve the effectiveness of government spokesperson in Indonesia.

IV. DISCUSSION

To be able to communicate public policies and decisions, the role of accountable spokesperson is crucial. Government spokesperson are responsible for explaining complex policies in an understandable manner and ensuring that the public is aware of the government's stance on various issues (Veneti and Nakou, 2025). In the case of crisis, government spokesperson play an important role in emergency risk communication. They provide timely, transparent, and accurate information to help manage the situation and mitigate public fear and misinformation (Savoia et al, 2023). Government spokesperson should also help to maintain and manage the government's reputation by addressing public concerns, countering misinformation, and presenting the government's perspective on contentious issues. In international relations, spokespersons engage in public diplomacy to promote the nation's foreign policy and influence public opinion abroad. This also involves strategic communication to foreign audiences and managing the country's image on the global stage (Krasnyak, 2020). Government spokesperson also take a role as the primary point of contact between the government and the media. They provide official statements, hold press conferences, and respond to media inquiries to ensure consistent and coherent communication (García-Santamaría, 2020).

The government's function in public communication during food safety incidents in Indonesia is hindered by several issues, including weak inter-agency coordination and the rapid spread of hoaxes and misleading information on social media. The subsections below analyse those issues and followed by possible recommendation to improve the performance of government spokesperson for food safety in Indonesia.

Lack of Coordination Amongst Food Safety Administrative Bodies

The food safety administrative framework in Indonesia involves several types of government bodies, including ministries and their sub-directorates, non-ministerial government agencies, and local government authorities. Key institutions involved in food safety include the National Agency for Drug and Food Control (NADFC/BPOM), the Ministry of Health (MoH), the Ministry of

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Agriculture (MoA), the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Affairs (MoFMA), the Ministry of Trade (MoT), the Ministry of Industry (Mol), and local governments.

The involvement of multiple agencies in regulating food safety has created **uncertainty regarding authority and responsibility**. The lack of a clearly designated top authority complicates decisions about who should represent Indonesia in international discussions on food safety standards (Hariyadi, 2008). During emergencies, such as outbreaks of foodborne illnesses, the public requires prompt reassurance (Hammonds, 2004), yet the government often struggles to provide a sense of security.

It is uncommon for a single agency to have complete authority over all aspects of a major food safety issue. This makes it difficult to quickly identify a spokesperson who can communicate clearly and provide timely guidance to the public. In many cases, overlapping agencies take time to coordinate their response, causing delays that exacerbate the crisis and erode public trust. As a result, the population may remain at risk for longer than necessary (Hammonds, 2004).

For instance, in 2018, Indonesian consumers faced confusion over the government's handling of a case involving 27 brands of imported canned mackerel found to contain worms. Three government bodies issued statements regarding the incident: the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries (MoFMA), the National Agency of Drug and Food Control (NADFC/BPOM), and the Ministry of Health (MoH). MoFMA was under scrutiny as it is responsible for issuing quarantine certificates for fishery products. NADFC oversees food registration, while MoH handles cases of food poisoning.

During the incident, the Minister of Health stated that the worms in the canned mackerel were not harmful to human health and therefore posed no significant risk (Abadi, 2018). In contrast, NADFC ordered the company to recall the affected products (NADFC, 2018). The Indonesian Consumers Foundation (YLKI) criticized NADFC's response, arguing that issuing a product recall without investigating the source of the contamination was insufficient (Abadi, 2018).

Appointment of A Single Spokesperson

Omojokun emphasized that regardless of the system in place, strong **communication and coordination** among agencies are essential. An effective food safety regulatory framework should be guided by principles such as **transparency, inclusiveness, integrity, clear role definitions, accountability, risk-based approaches, and equivalence**, which can serve as benchmarks for evaluating its effectiveness (Omojokun, 2003).

To address problems of coordination, overlap, and duplication in food adulteration regulation, this study recommends establishing a **single, central authority for food safety in Indonesia**. This agency would oversee the national food safety risk assessment process, providing key inputs for all relevant stakeholders to develop risk management and communication policies within their respective areas (Hariyadi, 2008).

Bass and Raul argue that a unified food agency is the most efficient model, as it reduces costs, clarifies accountability, and eliminates gaps in both screening and post-incident responsibilities (Bass & Raul, 2004). A central unit also serves as a clear reference point, streamlines administration, sets regulatory priorities, coordinates guidance and education for both consumers and food businesses, and enhances data collection, reporting, and enforcement in terms of focus, timeliness, and accountability (Yasuda, 2015).

Several countries, including Canada, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Bangladesh, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, have consolidated food safety regulatory functions under a single highest authority, with government reports indicating overall positive effects (GAO, 2005). For example, in New South Wales, the NSW Food Authority (NSWFA) oversees food adulteration regulation, coordinating with local governments, Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ), the Department of Primary Industries, and the NSW Department of Health. According to its 2018–2019 Annual Report, NSWFA monitors food safety across the entire supply chain, from paddock to plate (NSWFA, 2019).

In Indonesia, the National Agency of Drug and Food Control (NADFC) could serve as the **central coordinating authority** for the national food safety framework. Remaining a non-departmental agency accountable to the President, NADFC's role would expand to oversee nationwide food safety and act as the government's primary spokesperson for public communication on food safety issues.

The Rapid Spread of Hoax and Misleading Information

In the past, information was primarily distributed through printed media, which limited its reach. However, technological advancements such as the telephone, internet, radio, and television have made information dissemination faster, more accessible, and generally more reliable. Today, with just a single device, individuals can access virtually all information available in the digital world (Rosmani, Mutalib, Sarif, 2020). Governments have also leveraged these technologies to communicate policies and information, particularly during disasters, conflicts, or crises. Social media, in particular, offers opportunities for two-way communication between the public and government agencies, enabling rapid information sharing and engagement, although it also introduces challenges in managing inquiries and complaints effectively (Shan et al, 2015).

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Unfortunately, the rapid development of information technology and social media has also facilitated the widespread dissemination of hoaxes and misinformation. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp enable the rapid circulation of both accurate and false information. The speed of this dissemination often hinders the timely identification of falsehoods, making it challenging for the public to distinguish fact from fiction (Zahra and Setiawan, 2023). The prevalence of hoaxes can create confusion, a situation that is further intensified by the echo chamber effect, where individuals are primarily exposed to information that reinforces their preexisting beliefs (Chinnasamy, Salvosa, Esguerra, 2024). Additionally, the use of bots and clickbait techniques amplifies the spread of fake news, further complicating the public's ability to access reliable information (Shaari, 2025).

In Indonesia, there have been numerous instances in which hoaxes and misleading information spread rapidly and, unfortunately, are believed by the public. For example, in 2014, information circulated on social media claiming that canned food products from Thailand were contaminated with blood and the HIV virus. In response, the National Agency of Drug and Food Control (NADFC/BPOM) clarified that it had conducted thorough pre-market evaluations to assess the safety, quality, and nutritional content of imported food products, as well as ongoing post-market monitoring of products already distributed in Indonesia. NADFC/BPOM confirmed that no evidence supported the claims, emphasizing that HIV cannot survive outside the human host, and declared the circulating reports to be hoaxes (NADFC, 2014).

Another example, a chain message circulated on WhatsApp claimed that certain food products contained toxic genetically modified ingredients. The message warned consumers to be cautious when purchasing packaged foods with codes beginning with the number 8, allegedly indicating genetically modified food (GMF). It further stated that the United States, European Union, and African countries no longer consume GMF, and that bans had been issued by China, the World Expo, and even the Asian Games organizers. The message also claimed that Russia had proven GMF could cause animal extinction within three generations, citing examples such as red "cow" tomatoes, sweet corn, and purple sweet potatoes. Upon investigation, the Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs through its official website announces that these claims were found to be false (Komdigi, 2019).

Ensuring Coordinated, Timely, and Rapid Government Communication on Social Media

In recent years, the Indonesian government has begun to utilize social media to communicate news, policies, and official decisions. However, these efforts have not yet reached their full potential. The rapid pace at which media outlets, influencers, and other social media users respond to emerging issues often allows hoaxes and misleading information to spread far more quickly than official clarifications. This asymmetry in speed creates significant challenges for maintaining public trust and ensuring that accurate information reaches audiences in a timely manner.

To address these limitations, several improvements are necessary. First, the government must strengthen coordination among relevant agencies to ensure that the information disseminated is consistent and not contradictory. Clear and aligned messaging across institutions is essential to prevent confusion and overlapping narratives. Second, government responses on social media must be timely, proactive, and continuously updated. Rapid, accurate communication is critical to countering misinformation before it gains traction and to ensuring that the public receives reliable guidance during food safety incidents and other crises. By enhancing inter-agency coordination and improving the speed and responsiveness of its social media communication, the government can better fulfill its role in safeguarding public understanding and managing food safety risks.

With the rise of digital media, government spokespersons can also utilize social media platforms to disseminate information and engage with the public. This includes managing official government social media accounts and ensuring that messages are consistent across various channels. To ensure this, the government of Indonesia can make a guideline comprises social media policy.

Indonesian government can adopt the social media policy established by NSW government. Social media serves as a powerful tool enabling the NSW Government to engage with communities in an immediate, familiar, and accessible manner. When used effectively, it can foster meaningful connections, strengthen public trust, counter misinformation, influence behaviour, and build supportive communities. These guidelines outline how NSW Government agencies can utilise social media to better serve the public and offer best-practice advice for managers of official government accounts to ensure consistent, high-quality user experiences. They are intended to support teams with varying levels of expertise. The guidance provided is general in nature and should be applied in conjunction with relevant NSW Government, departmental, and agency-specific policies (NSW Government).

V. CONCLUSION

Food safety remains a critical public health concern in Indonesia, marked by persistent challenges stemming from food adulteration, contamination, and systemic regulatory weaknesses. This study demonstrates that the effectiveness of food safety governance depends not only on regulatory standards and enforcement capacity, but also on the government's ability to

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communicate risks clearly, consistently, and credibly. Government spokespersons serve as the central actors in this process, particularly during crises when public anxiety is high and reliable information is urgently needed.

The findings reveal that Indonesia's current public communication system is hindered by two principal constraints: fragmented institutional responsibilities and the rapid spread of misinformation on digital platforms. Weak coordination among key agencies such as NADFC/BPOM, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Marine Affairs contributes to inconsistent messaging, delays in crisis response, and public confusion. At the same time, the speed at which hoaxes and misleading narratives circulate on social media continues to outpace official clarifications, amplifying uncertainty and eroding public trust.

To address these challenges, this study proposes the establishment of a single highest authority for food safety which led by NADFC/BPOM to centralize risk assessment, strengthen inter-agency coordination, and streamline crisis communication. Comparative insights from jurisdictions such as New South Wales, Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom illustrate that consolidating responsibility under a unified agency enhances accountability, improves enforcement outcomes, and provides a clearer institutional voice during emergencies. Moreover, the Indonesian government must adopt a more strategic and responsive approach to digital communication, including the development of unified social media guidelines to ensure timely, accurate, and consistent dissemination of information.

Ultimately, strengthening the role of government spokespersons is essential for safeguarding public health, restoring public trust, and enhancing the overall integrity of Indonesia's food safety system. By ensuring coherent institutional structures, proactive digital engagement, and evidence-based communication practices, Indonesia can significantly improve its capacity to manage food safety risks and respond more effectively to future crises.

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