

Handling Covid-19 in Sampang: leadership and local elite public communication strategy

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Abstract After the Covid-19 outbreak, the emergence of an economic recession is the impact of various policies to prevent the spread of the virus, such as the extreme lockdown policy to Large-Scale Social Restrictions. Sampang, a small regency in Madura Island, Indonesia, has successfully maintained the low case of Covid-19. This article elaborates on the success of the Sampang Regency in maintaining its green zone status. More specifically, what is the Sampang government's communication strategy during the Covid-19 pandemics. This article used a qualitative method with a case study approach in ten villages of Sampang with a Focus Group Discussion. The results show that the local elite's communication strategy in Sampang during the pandemic situation does not only physically come directly to the field or meet villagers but also virtually using mass media effective to maintain the low index Covid-19 transmission.

Keywords: public opinion; effective communication; rural communication; covid-19

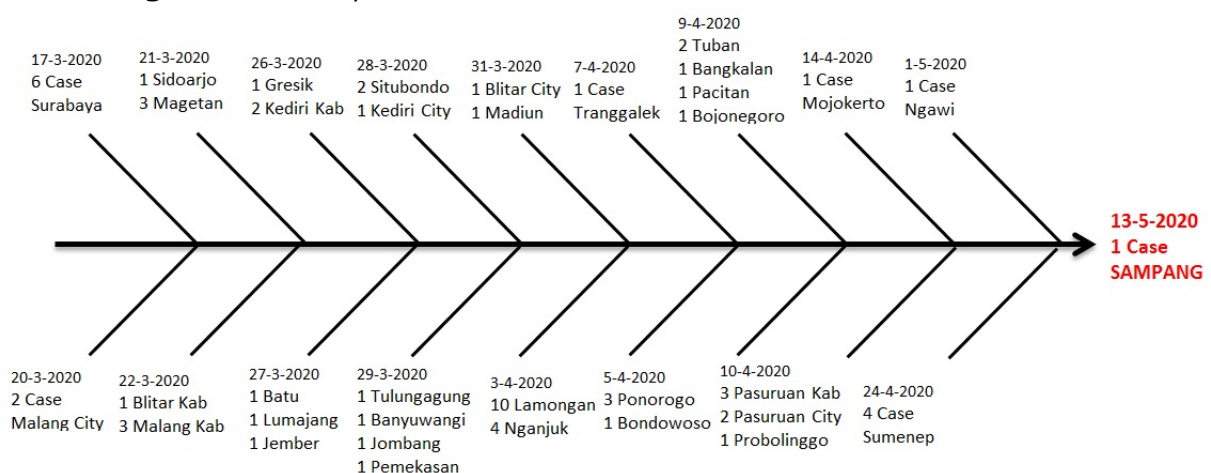
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INTRODUCTION

In early December 2019 in Wuhan, China, a new type of virus emerged that threatened the health systems of various countries worldwide (Lovari, 2020). It is suspected that this virus was transmitted from animals to humans, which originated from animal market activities in Wuhan. As of 12 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has published a disease outbreak due to the latest coronavirus with the term Covid-19 virus as a global pandemic (Mufida 2020). The current situation related to the Covid-19 outbreak had become a significant issue regarding the health crisis that consumes the most resources globally, including Indonesia (Chinmi et al., 2021; Nursanti et al., 2021). Furthermore, the emergence of unemployment and poverty rate is the impact of various policies to prevent the spread of the virus, such as the extreme lockdown policy to Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB), which aim to minimise the number of deaths from the virus (Barany & Simanjuntak, 2020).

In Indonesia, the beginning of the news regarding the first case of positive patient confirmation of Covid-19 occurred in Depok, West Java. In Indonesia, many local governments were responsive and responded quickly with various policies to prevent the spread of the virus. However, some local governments seem slow or hesitant (waiting for direction from the central government) in dealing with the development of the Covid-19 outbreak. Based on data from the Task Force for the Acceleration of Handling Covid-19 in East Java Province, Sampang Regency is an administrative area considered quite successful in preventing the spread of the Covid 19 virus. As a pilot area, one of Sampang's achievements is that it has succeeded in becoming the regency with the most extended green zone status (none positive case reports of Covid-19. In contrast to other regions (all districts/cities) have turned into a red zone (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Development of the Covid-19 Red Zone Area in East Java



Source: infocovid19.jatimprov.go.id

The status of the most extended green zone in East Java is evidence of the Sampang Government's rapid response in stemming the entry of disease outbreaks due to the Covid-19 in the Sampang Regency. For example, the implementation of a pandemic rapid response policy is on 16 March 2020, when the Sampang district head issued a circular number 440/655/434.203/2020 concerning vigilance and prevention of virus disease 2019 (Covid-19) through anticipation and early detection of the deadly virus in remote areas of Sampang. All village heads immediately followed up on the Sampang regent's circular. They took various steps to direct the community's behaviour to be more vigilant and maintain health protocols during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The communication process of local elites (regents and village heads) to tackle the Covid-19 disease outbreak was done through forming public opinion. The local elites are important figures because, as public officials in Sampang communities, the opinions expressed by the two figures can influence people's behaviour in a pandemic situation. The communication strategy process and the formation of public opinion by local elites usually use mass media, social media, television advertisements, and banner boards (Saputra et al., 2021) located on the main roads in Sampang Sampang Regency. Other examples are the supervision by the village government and the volunteer team or the Covid-19 Response Village Task Force. These volunteers are tasked with conducting health protocol campaigns and communicating various policies on Covid-19, such as physical distancing and social distancing. In the Covid-19 volunteer task force structure, the village head becomes the chairman and deputy head of the Village Consultative Body (BPD). Meanwhile, the members consist of all BPD members, RW, RW, local village assistants and various assistants in the village, both from the Ministry of Social Affairs, BKKBN and other assistants. Meanwhile, volunteer partners consist of Bhabinkamtibmas, Babinsa and other levels from various village-related agencies (Wahed, 2020).

This article elaborates on the success of the Sampang Regency in maintaining its green zone status. More specifically, how is the Sampang government's communication strategy during the Covid-19 pandemic? What were forms of public opinion created by the formal elite (district heads and village heads) to influence villagers during the Covid-19 pandemic? Noelle-Neumann states that opinion is the level of agreement of a particular population. Referring to the spiral theory of silence, opinion is as meaningful as something that is considered acceptable. Neumann further defines public opinion as an attitude or behaviour that a person must express in public if he does not want to cause himself to be isolated in areas of controversy or change. Thus, public opinion is an attitude that can be expressed without the danger of isolating oneself (Eriyanto, 2012; Putranto & Susilo, 2018; Susilo & Putranto, 2021).

The spiral of silence theory explains that individuals have sensory organs used to determine which opinions and ways of behaviour are approved or disapproved of by their environment and which opinions and behaviours gain or lose power (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Individuals who believe that their opinions on various public opinions are part of the opinion of a minority will take a silent attitude and hesitate to express their perceptions (Alexandre & Aguiar-Conraria, 2021; Duncan et al., 2020). In contrast, those who believe that their opinion represents the majority tend to speak loudly to others. From this explanation, the majority who actively play a role as formers of public opinion in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic situation in Sampang District are local elite actors such as district heads and village heads. Public opinion from an authority figure of public officials has a more effective influence on society. For example, a village head could mobilise villagers to comply with village regulations. Although sometimes, the influence of the village head (regulations made by village authorities) is also synonymous with personal interests (Pribadi, 2015). Meanwhile, Prasetyo et al. (2020) also explained that the role of the village head during the Covid-19 pandemic was to form an opinion. The role of the village elite as opinion formers is supported by strong patron-client relationships at the village level (Prasetyo et al., 2020).

As the ruler of the formal authority, the village head is hierarchically more active in realising programs instructed from above, such as the sub-district head, district head and so on (Akbar et al., 2020; Murti, 2020). On the other hand, as informal elites, the village heads also have to develop their initiatives to advance the village. Thus, the village heads as informal leaders are not determined by the particular level of authority they should have but are more integrated into a traditional measure as protectors of the villagers (Budiyaniti et al., 2020; Prijono & Tjiptoherijanto, 1983). The village head's initiative in the form of implementing policies related to Covid-19 must get a good perception from the community. For various policies to be successful and villagers' perceptions towards the village head, mass media and impersonal communication channels can be used. A village head who can use communication channels simultaneously in handling the Covid-19 pandemic makes the community comply with health protocols and makes the village remain a green zone or no Covid-19 positive patients (Hirko et al., 2020).

The formal and informal elite groups are divided based on their power base (Helberger, 2020). The foundation of the formal elite is the official rules that are encapsulated in a position, while the foundation for the informal elite is the recognition and trust of the community (Hofstede, 1971). Thus, Weber theory divides into three categories of elite leadership. First, legal leadership is an authority whose legality comes from legality or official rules. Second, traditional leadership, whose legitimacy rests on customs. Third, charismatic leadership,

whose legitimacy comes from one's charisma or special quality, as well as the recognition of others for that charism (Budiyanti et al., 2020; Johnson & Lawang, 1994).

This article used two main theories: the spiral of silence theory by Neumann and Weber's storage theory (Budiyanti et al., 2020; Epley, 2015; Noelle-Neumann, 1974). The spiral of silence theory as a unit of analysis explains the dominant majority opinion and influences individual behaviour in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in Sampang. In comparison, Weber's leadership theory talks about how the role of local elites in forming opinions that are developing in village communities, more specifically whether the opinion-forming process tends to use formal authority, charismatic authority, or traditional authority (AKDENİZ, 2020; Said, 2007; Vuori et al., 2020). Thus, communication resources impact the personal legitimacy aspects of local elites who can invite, influence and call upon the community, especially villagers as followers. In addition, the public opinion communication process can be successful if there is a patrimonialism relationship between the elite and the village community, this is permanently established wherever and whenever it is, more specifically when a pandemic occurs due to the deadly virus Covid-19, which threatens the safety of the villagers of Sampang Regency.

Several previous studies that focused on the Covid-19 pandemic situation in Sampang have been discussed previously. However, several previous studies have not answered some gaps, especially regarding the unit of analysis used in this article to more fully elaborate on handling the pandemic in the Sampang Regency. This article used spiral of silence communication theory and leadership theory which can differentiate it from previous studies. In order to make the novelty of the study more visible, the authors discussed several previous studies. For example, Hidayat (2020) related studies implementation of village fund policies for handling the Covid-19 disease outbreak in Sampang Regency. The research results on the implementation process of village fund policies for a pandemic response went quite well. One of the factors that support the success of the resource communication, including socialising programs and information about the Covid-19 pandemic, is running optimally. Another resource, namely the bureaucratic structure, coordination between official public actors runs dynamically and collaboratively. At the same time, the inhibiting factor arises from the resource dimension due to the limited budget for village funds in dealing with Covid-19 in Sampang Regency, so that infrastructure is not sufficient to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Furthermore, still related to the Sampang pandemic, this research found the roles of the village head in the Covid-19 pandemic situation in Sampang (Prasetyo et al., 2020). This study found variations in roles, including forming opinions on awareness of the Covid-19 virus, consolidation through volunteers and information centres (Call

Centers), and the role of facilitators in the Covid-19 social assistance program. Another study focuses on the social role of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic situation (Arifin & Zaini, 2020). We found that the response of *pesantren* organisations to the Covid-19 phenomenon is quite diverse depending on whether the *pesantren* is conservative or non-conservative. The response of the *pesantren* to the response to Covid-19 is divided into two approaches, namely structural medical and cultural-religious.

In a broader scope, several studies on government communication strategies and the development of public opinion in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic have also emerged in several other countries. As in Italy, the focus of the study looks at the misinformation of Covid-19 that spreads in the community (Lovari, 2020). When the pandemic hit the European continent, Italy was one of the countries severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, the Italian government increased its official social media role to reduce misinformation during the Covid-19 emergency. The presence of the State through official government-owned social media sources has proven to be effective in restoring public trust. This digital-based communication strategy reduces fake narratives (hoaxes) through official social media portals that are transparent, strategic, and proactive (Lovari, 2020).

Meanwhile, other studies in China, such as by Zhao et al. (2020), studied the central issue of Covid-19, which was popular on social media (Sina Microblog). This study shows that much information about the pandemic has been disseminated and has received public attention. This can help the government make policies according to the community's needs and make targeted steps to control the spread of the Covid-19 virus. In another research, Zhang et al. (2020) focused more on public communication and risk management of the Covid-19 emergency. In the Wuhan case, it was revealed that risk management communication was not effective in hampering the emergency response policy for the Covid-19 outbreak. The Wuhan government has failed to address the rumours and uncertainty about the risk perception of Covid-19. This caused public panic throughout the Wuhan area. In Wuhan, the public opinion communication model during the emergency response must involve three parties: the government, experts, and the general public. Thus, accessibility and openness of information can effectively increase public confidence about the development of the Covid-19 pandemic (Kosack et al., 2021; Malecki et al., 2021; Zaremba et al., 2021).

As previously explained, the cases in Italy and China are included in the category of developed countries. Therefore, the authors wanted to empirically test the spiral of silence theory in the Sampang region of Indonesia, where the majority of the population work as farmers and have a relatively low educational background. The research assumption that is to be proven is that the penetration of internet technology and public education can determine the process of forming public opinion,

especially during the emergency response conditions for the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, this article attempts to descriptively test whether there are differences in the two previous countries' disaster response (Italy and China) and Sampang, Indonesia.

METHODOLOGY

This article used a qualitative method with a case study approach in ten Sampang District, East Java Province villages. The reason for choosing ten villages was for ease of data collection. Other than that, Sampang was quite successful in stemming the spread of Covid-19 (the longest one to hold the green zone status in East Java Province). This study was a descriptive analysis with the aim to provide a more detailed description of a symptom or phenomenon. As Mars and Stoker (2010) argue, qualitative study is a commonly used term that is identical to data collection techniques such as observation, participant observation, individual in-depth interviews, focus group discussion (FGD). This research instrument sought the experiences of key informants as well as to place them appropriately in context.

Secondary data was also needed for this research, such as news about the Covid-19 Sampang virus in various online media, documentation, and literature studies. Meanwhile, the primary data was obtained through interviews with selected informants, namely the Regent of Sampang and ten village heads in the Sampang Regency. The ten village heads came from Jelgung village, Bepelle village, Noreh village, Disana village, Labang village, Rapalaok village, Napodaya village, Taman village, Mlakah village and Panggung village. At the data analysis stage, this article used a procedure in several stages: (1) data collection through literature and electronic media documents; (2) data classification; (3) transcripts of recorded interviews; (4) data arrangements have been identified; (5) anonymous sensitive data; (6) data coding; (7) identification of themes; (8) recording; (9) category and theme development; (10) linking empirical facts to theory; (11) writing a research report (Harrison, 2007).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Dynamics Of Handling Covid-19 Pandemic In Sampang

At the beginning of 2020, the Sampang Regency Government faced a threat in the form of a pandemic outbreak due to the Covid-19 virus. This condition must be anticipated by regents and village heads as local elites and public officials. The Sampang Regent explained that the success of his region holding the longest green zone status compared to other regencies in East Java Province was not a fact of political dramaturgy or an image play. This status was obtained because the Sampang Regency Government took tactical steps to anticipate Covid-19 early, even before there were instructions from the central government. For example, there are special instructions for all civil servants (ASN) and heads of offices in Sampang that when

attending meetings out of town or travelling, they must obtain the Regent's permission. Then, many government initiatives disseminate information to the public to comply with health protocols and physical distancing policies. The Sampang district government has also established three command posts at the district level, fourteen posts at the sub-district level, and at least one post in all villages (Interview with the Regent of Sampang, 14 April 2020).

The Sampang Regent gave many appeals and messages to prevent the spread of Covid-19, including that people do not need to worry and panic, must get used to washing their hands with soap and running water, try not to cancel ablution, cultivate clean and healthy living habits, consume balanced nutrition and eat more vegetables and fruits, reduce travel or go out of town, visit health facilities if there are symptoms of Covid-19, wear masks, and avoid crowds (Sampang.go.id, 2020). As commanders in the fight against Covid-19, the Regent and village heads play a significant role. The Regent is the head of the Covid-19 Task Force volunteer team at the district level, while the village heads are the head of the volunteer team at the village level. In the village, village heads represent the authority of the Regent. The Sampang Village Community Empowerment and Empowerment Service (DPMD) also provided direct support by coordinating with all village heads and allocating a budget to prevent the Covid-19 disease outbreak, sourced from village funds of around 270 thousand SGD. Each village has a minimum budget of 1.500 SGD. The proportion of funds received depends on the population of each village (Mediamadura.com, 2020).

Various Sampang government programs require the role of important figures in the community. In general, the opinions expressed by the Regent can influence people's behaviour. For example, the government's campaign to maintain physical health in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Bupati is a leader with formal authority. According to Weber, formal legal leadership is based on a commitment to a promulgated set of rules and regulated impersonally. So, formal legal leadership is a legitimate power based on existing regulations (Johnson & Lawang, 1994). In addition, the Regent of Sampang also has the religious title 'Hajj.' He is familiarly called Haji Idi. This degree compliments the source of authority as a charismatic leader. The form of charismatic leadership is based on the strong belief of the people who hold the view that someone who holds the title of Hajj is a good person, always gives religious advice, has a noble character, and always maintains his attitude and behaviour in social interactions in society. This source of religious authority is quite relevant to Weber's charismatic leadership model. The explanation of this leadership model is based on the extraordinary qualities possessed by a leader that attract followers. This leadership model is closely related to theological beliefs (Said, 2007).

The study of formal leadership in Madura is not new. In a previous study (Personal, 2015), it was found that the Madurese community divided the village elite into three categories. First, the formal elite of the village includes the village head (klebun) and village officials. Second, the religious elite represented by the Kiai's religious leaders. Third, the informal village elite, identical to the group of heroes and vigilantes, is called Blater. What about the relevance of elite theory at the village level? According to the power theorist Weber, a small group within an organisation with more power than a large number of its members can be classified as a village elite. Thus, in the context of villages in Madura, Pribadi's findings on elite klebun also state that elites have formal leadership and are held by village heads and village officials in Sampang. The task of village heads is to direct the various interests that exist in the form of demands and expectations of the village community.

Further discussion focused on leadership dynamics during the Covid-19 pandemic at the village level. According to informants who are the Village Head, Camat, and Task Force of Sampang Regency, they go down directly to the village level. This is because the Sampang Regent asked the village government to optimise village funds (DD) and village fund allocations (ADD) to prevent the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, the two components of the budget were divided for the purchase of masks, village-level volunteer operations, spraying disinfectants, and providing isolation places for migrants returning to the village. Interestingly, during the pandemic, there was a phenomenon of going home for TKI who returned to Sampang for various reasons, such as losing their job, friendship with the family. Therefore, several villages have been invaded by migrant workers or Indonesian workers (TKI) abroad who have returned to Sampang. At least, the Village Government pays special attention to TKI who has just returned from abroad so that all of them fall into the category of high-risk people (ODR) and ODR who have just arrived in Sampang must self-isolate and be closely monitored, so they are not free to leave the house.

Geographically, the Sampang area is flanked by two regencies, namely Bangkalan in the west and Pamekasan in the east. The Sampang government has tightened access to the Sampang administrative area, primarily through the construction of a post in a location directly adjacent to Bangkalan to maintain the status of the Green Zone area. According to the Sampang Regent, the construction of the post is intended for inspection of Sampang residents or outsiders who enter the Sampang administrative area (Interview with Sampang Regent, 14 April 2020). Various dynamics in the process of implementing the Covid-19 handling policy were quite successful in the Sampang case. According to data, East Java Province has a total of 38 regencies/cities. At least 37 areas were designated as red zones on 11 May 2020 because there were positive cases of Covid-19 patients.

Referring to the data on the distribution of Covid-19 cases, there is one regency that is still in the green zone status, namely Sampang. Sampang's green zone status means that there are no positive patients exposed to the Covid-19 virus.

Another factor in Sampang's success is various innovations from the Sampang Regency Government in monitoring the development of Covid-19 cases. Some of these innovations include creating an internet-based information data centre to monitor the development of information and making various data and visualisation charts related to the Covid-19 pandemic situation in Sampang Regency. The Covid-19 information data centre is managed directly by the Sampang Communication and Information Office (Diskominfo). In addition, the Regional Apparatus Organization (OPD Diskominfo Sampang) is tasked with assisting the Regent, especially in communication and information technology, as well as collecting data on the development of the Covid-19 emergency response condition in Sampang (Hidayat, 2020).

Communication Strategies During Pandemic in Sampang

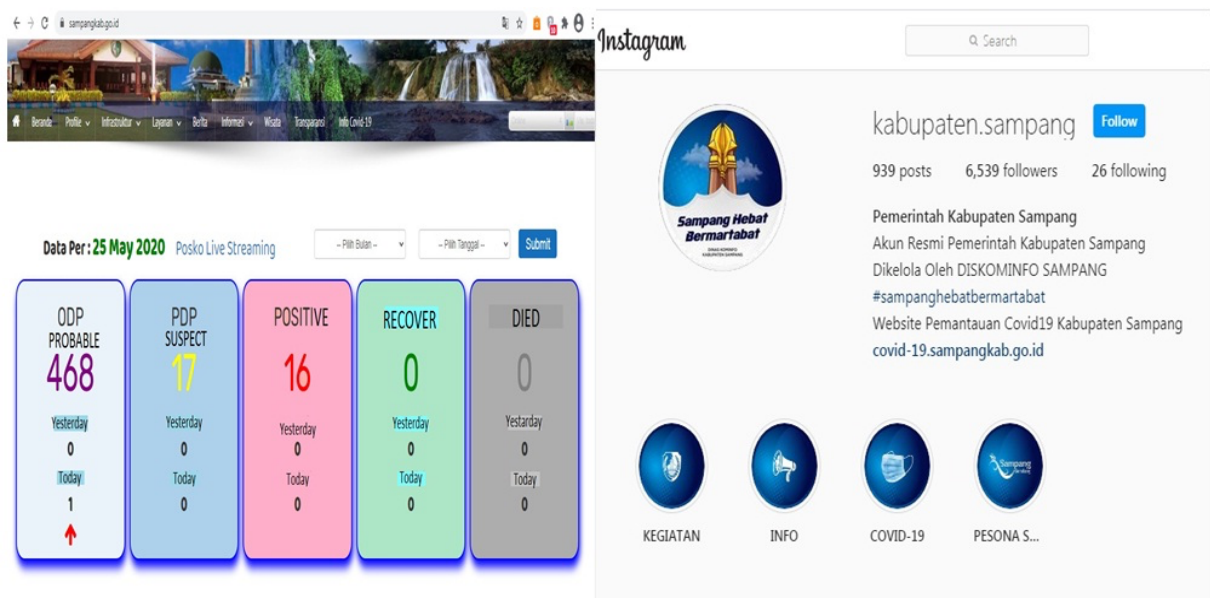
Because strategy is an effort to achieve goals, it is necessary to clarify the Sampang government's goals. In a pandemic situation, the regional government's biggest goal is to have or maintain a green zone status or no Covid-19 positive patients. In an emergency response situation facing the Covid-19 outbreak, the Regent and the Village Head can simultaneously use various communication channels to achieve the desired goals. The Regent must be able to communicate well with the power structures below him (sub-districts and villages) because effective communication between public officials is the key to dealing with the threat of the coronavirus outbreak. Then, public officials are also required to implement political communication strategies that open more comprehensive insights about the pandemic and influence people's attitudes and behaviour so that they support every policy program related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Implementing the media-based communication strategy that the Sampang government has carried out is to establish an internet-based data centre to monitor the development of Covid-19. This media provides information, data, and visualisation about the handling of the pandemic outbreak in Sampang. The Covid-19 monitoring website in Sampang Regency is the covid-19.sampang.go.id. The information provided includes the development of the number of possible cases (ODP), suspected cases (PDP), the number of positive people for Covid-19, and the number of patients who died. In addition, this site also contains a map of the distribution and risk areas in 14 sub-districts and 6 urban villages in Sampang. The function of grouping risk level categories in the sub-district area is to provide information to the public so as not to visit sub-districts that are in the red zone or where the positive case of Covid-19 is relatively high. Meanwhile, village governments whose territories are in high-risk zones with a large

number of positive cases must be able to work even harder to stem the spread of Covid-19. Thus, the information provided can make the community and village government more vigilant, especially for areas that are in vulnerable zones and at high risk of Covid-19 transmission.

The use of social media belonging to the Sampang government in handling the Covid-19 pandemic in Sampang also significantly affects building communication with the community. Social media can be a new space for the public to directly discuss various supports and criticisms of the Sampang government's policies. For example, policies related to handling the Covid-19 pandemic and various distributions of social assistance in the form of goods and cash. The Sampang government also uses social media to support the publication and dissemination of information on the development of the Covid-19 pandemic and as a means of social interaction with the community. Sampang Regency has social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The most active media in updating information related to events or cases of Covid-19 is the official Instagram account of the Sampang district government. All of these social media are managed by the Sampang Department of Communication and Information (Diskominfo). Figure 2 shows the appearance of the Instagram website and social media, which contains much information about the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 2. Website and Instagram owned by Sampang Regency Government



Source: Author Compilation (2021)

In the Covid-19 emergency response situation, local governments need to increase interaction with the community through social media and direct field visits to villages. The Regent has the authority to regulate and manage the community's needs on his own initiative in accordance with the conditions and needs of the Sampang residents. For example, regarding the social and economic impact of

the Covid-19 pandemic situation. Regional heads are responsible for taking tactical steps in the context of preventing the Covid-19 outbreak. Community participation is one of the main factors to prevent the spread of the virus from spreading further. This collaboration model is a form of synergy between the state and civil society. This article finds that the communication strategy model in the supra-village power structure (regency) is more dominant in utilising mass media to prevent and educate the dangers of the spread of Covid-19. This is a consequence of the increasing number of social media users. Thus, the interaction process between citizens and public officials related to the Covid-19 pandemic becomes faster in virtual spaces or internet media.

The Regent's digital-based communication strategy is quite effective because it is supported by the smart village program policy, namely free internet access for villagers affected by the pandemic in Sampang Regency. A village head informant assessed that internet access was very useful in the Covid-19 pandemic situation, especially due to the increasing number of villagers reporting and communicating with other family members abroad via the WhatsApp application. In addition, many learning activities use online methods (Interview with the Village Head of Disanah, 14 May 2020). The smart village program begins with constructing internet network (wifi) tower infrastructure in every village in Sampang Regency. The DPMD explained that the purpose of this development was to facilitate communication, access to information, and submit reports to sub-districts. Meanwhile, the detailed budget for the construction of the tower is SGD 55,000 plus taxes and administrative costs of SGD 1,700, so that the total development cost is SGD 72,000. The entire cost is taken from the village fund (Bahari, nd).

Based on the confessions of several village heads, the strength of the wifi signal coverage is quite varied. The signal is quite strong and can transmit throughout the village area with the addition of a small tower in each hamlet. However, there is free internet service that can only be accessed around the village head office or not at all of the total 180 villages in Sampang Regency, only about 62 villages whose construction has been completed one hundred per cent. Judging from the signal strength of the data from the ten villages that were the research sites, two villages (Jelgung and Disah) are included in the strong signal category. Meanwhile, the other six villages (Napo, Taman, Mlaka, Panggung, Bepelle, Noreh) have a sufficient signal category or can only be accessed in a limited place, namely at the village hall. Lastly, two villages (Labang and Rapalaok) have no signal even though a transmitting tower has been built. According to Kalaloi (2019), the improvement of social media access infrastructure for villagers to improve social media access infrastructure for villagers is to conduct public discussions in a wider scope and scale among the

community. In addition, open access to communication draws public attention to current topics and issues.

Furthermore, regarding village government communication strategies, village heads are more likely to use interpersonal communication strategies or *blusukan*, namely an individual approach. Although there is already an information center (call center) for each village in the form of a WhatsApp group (WAG), the village head informant continues to monitor residents directly (*blusukan*). This is understandable because the position of the village head is the lowest power structure so that it has more emotional bonds with villagers. Referring to the statement of one of the informants, the Taman Village Head admitted that only giving orders through online communication media (WA) and circulars were not effective enough.

As explained above, the construction of internet and media facilities in rural communities is a public discussion space, especially for media interactions between the government and villagers during the Covid-19 pandemic (Conway, 2017; Ellison & Hardey, 2014; Turow, 2009). Open access to communication makes it easier for the government to form broader public opinion on issues of a new lifestyle (new normal) or adjustment of people's behaviour in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, elite officials use the internet and interpersonal communication to generate dominant perceptions. Based on the findings of this article, the process of forming public opinion through internet-based (social media) and interpersonal (*blusukan*) communication strategies shows the relevance of Neumann's spiral of silence communication theory (Bandrovskyi, 2020; Krishna & Kim, 2020; Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

According to Neumann's theory, public opinion is created through a process known as the spiral of silence. On strategic issues, people form impressions about the distribution of opinions. For example, they try to determine whether they are the majority group and then try to determine whether public opinion agrees with theirs. If they feel they are in a minority situation, then they prefer to remain silent about the issue (Duku, 2014). The mass media has a very important role in the spiral of silence theory because the mass media serves as the main reference source for the public to find forms of public opinion. There are at least three ways the mass media exert influence. First, the mass media form the impression of dominant opinion. Second, the mass media forms an impression about which opinions are on the rise. Third, the mass media form an impression about which opinions can be conveyed in public without being abandoned (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

As already explained, there is a relationship between the spiral of silence theory and public opinion. In the context of Sampang Village, individual actions that are proven to be inconsistent with public opinion will lead to sanctions, social isolation, and conflict. For example, the government forms public opinion about the adaptation of a new lifestyle (new normal), which is a condition where rural communities

can return to their activities, work, and worship as usual as before the pandemic. Even so, the design of the new social life must still adhere to health protocols. If there are individuals who violate health protocols, namely not wearing masks or holding a wedding party, there is a threat of social isolation sanctions.

Individuals who violate this health protocol are a minority group because they have scepticism. They think Covid-19 is harmless or do not even believe in the Covid-19 virus. According to the spiral of silence theory, the phenomenon of individuals voicing opposing opinions or acting inconsistently with public opinion creates danger of isolation. The hegemony of public opinion forces individuals or groups to behave and act in accordance with general provisions (Dharma, 2016). They consider the Covid-19 issue to be a minority view, so they prefer to remain silent or refrain from expressing their perceptions. On the other hand, those who believe that their views are in the majority are more likely to share them with others.

CONCLUSION

One of the success factors of Sampang in obtaining green zone status longer than other regions is that the Sampang government's public communication has been quite effective. The communication dimension includes aspects of socialising the Covid-19 response program, data center information (updates on the number of Covid-19 cases), and public opinion formation to be aware of the threat of the Covid-19 virus. This article concludes that the communication strategy of local elites in a pandemic situation is not only physically coming directly to the field or meeting residents (*blusukan*), but also virtually using mass media. Mass media-based communication strategies are more dominant in the power structure at the district level. Communication of the Regent's authority is carried out using mass media such as Website, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, and Instagram. Meanwhile, the physical-based communication strategy (*blusukan*) is used mainly by the village government. The majority of village heads communicate face-to-face with villagers, the majority of whom work as farmers. This proves that in the village context, the relationship between the village head and residents is more emotional so that interpersonal communication strategies are more effective in the Covid-19 pandemic situation.

Based on the two models of communication strategies above, the Regent and the village head are opinion-forming figures who are quite influential in the Sampang community. These two local elites dominate public opinion about the Covid-19 pandemic. This opinion-forming role uses the legitimacy of Weber's (1947) sources of power based on formal leadership and charismatic leadership. Thus, this article reinforces Weber's classic theory of leadership authority in society. Another theoretical implication is that individual actions that go against public opinion (violating health protocols) can lead to social isolation. If

there are villagers who have individual opinions that are different from public opinion, that person tends to be silent or follow public opinion. Minority individuals in villages who choose silence are clearly relevant to the assumptions of Noelle-Neumann (1974) in the spiral of silence theory. Individuals in minority positions tend not to have their opinions heard, even because there are sanctions, social isolation, and conflicts for violating social rules during the Covid-19 pandemic.

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