

APOLOGIA STRATEGIES AND ETHICAL ASPECTS OF GOVERNMENT PUBLIC RELATIONS IN A CRISIS SITUATION

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Abstract

The research aims to evaluate apologia strategy based on ethical perspective of public relations. The research applies standards of ethics from The Indonesian Public Relations Association and Apologia Theory. Some research proves that the ability of an organization to deal with a crisis depends on the types of allegations during a crisis. The research tests whether the strategies of Government Public Relations (GPR) of Malang Regency also appropriate with these standard when the organization faces an allegation of corruption. Conducting content analysis on 47 editions of online news, the research reveals that the GPR has adopted ethical standard when delivery information in quote news as a channel of crisis communication. All the ethical standards applied are concerning to public interest, telling true information, address the economic, physical and psychological concerns of the public.

Keywords: *Apologia, Communication, Crisis, Ethics, Government Public Relations, Indonesia*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengevaluasi strategi apologia berdasarkan perspektif etika public relations. Penelitian ini menerapkan standar etika dari Asosiasi Hubungan Masyarakat Indonesia dan Teori Apologia. Beberapa penelitian membuktikan bahwa kemampuan organisasi untuk menghadapi krisis tergantung pada jenis dugaan selama krisis. Penelitian ini menguji apakah strategi Hubungan Masyarakat Pemerintah (GPR) Kabupaten Malang juga sesuai dengan standar ini ketika organisasi menghadapi tuduhan korupsi. Melakukan analisis isi pada 47 edisi berita online, penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa GPR telah mengadopsi standar etika ketika menyampaikan informasi di kutipan berita sebagai saluran komunikasi krisis. Semua standar etika yang diterapkan berkenaan dengan kepentingan publik, menyampaikan informasi yang benar, mengatasi masalah ekonomi, fisik, dan psikologis masyarakat.

Kata kunci: Apologia, Komunikasi, Krisis, Etika, Hubungan Masyarakat Pemerintah, Indonesia

1. INTRODUCTION

In this study, Apologia Theory is applied to measure crisis response when government agencies face a crisis due to corruption. This research focuses on the ethics of public relations in crisis situations, namely how government public relations practitioners (GPR) implement crisis response strategies. Crisis is an unexpected event that creates uncertainty and threat and endangers the image, identity or reputation of an individual or company (Devlin, 2007). Individuals and institutions are likely facing a variety of potential crises (Coombs et al, 2015), such as technological crises, confrontation, malevolence, natural disasters, products or management (Kriyantono, 2015). Urgency in crisis situations is influenced by the seriousness of the crisis and the audience's assessment of the crisis actors' responsibility for the crisis that has occurred (Coombs, 2015). Apologia research has been carried out in many Western countries (Kriyantono, 2019). This research is important to find out whether the apologia strategy used by a number of studies which are mostly from Western countries can also be applied in Indonesia given the cultural differences between western and Asian countries. This research is expected to be able to contribute to enrich the study of public relations apologia in the Indonesian context, which until now is still lacking (Kriyantono & McKenna, 2017).

“Apologia strategies provide the basis for articulating crisis response strategies, ways to categorize what manager said and did after a crisis” (Coombs, 2015, h. 340). Based on literature, apologia has four strategies, namely denial that denies the accusation and considers the accusation to be false; bolstering which focuses on the positive, strengths, and advantages of past relationships; differentiation which aims to change the audience's meaning about the crisis; and a transcendence strategy that defines context in a broader and abstract form (Ware & Linkugel, 1973; Coombs, 2015; Heath, 2013).

In this research, Apologia Theory is applied to explain crisis strategies from

GPR of Malang Regency when the Regent was captured due to corruption in 2018. It can be said that apologia strategies are applied by GPR practitioners to defend their leader when the leader are accused of corruption, “the accused chose to face his accusers and to speak in defending of himself” (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 273). The aim is to obtain good impression from other people (Kriyantono, 2019).

Initially apologia was created for individuals, but some research later proved that apologia can also be applied to companies and organizations (Hearit, 2013). Kriyantono (2017) said that the organization has a reputation that has the opportunity to get attacks from outside and management can do self-defense by responding to these attacks. In line with the above opinion, Schultz and Seeger (quoted in Heath, 2005) said that “organizations face the same question of moral nature, motives, and reputation as individuals”. Hearit and Brown (2004) also added that apologia began to focus on the role of public relations practitioners in responding to crises to maintain the organization's image.

Organizations, certainly, may face a crisis during their life in which crisis is an unexpected, unstable situation and full of uncertainty which results in threatening reputation (Coombs, 2015). Within an organization or the company is impossible if always get a positive image, of course there is the tides affected by the crisis public trust that has an impact negative of its image (Windriati, Darmawan, & Romadhan, 2019).

“A crisis is a critical period following an event that might negatively affect an organization in which decisions have to be made that will affect the bottom line of an organization” (Harrison, 2005, p. 11). If they are eager to endure the tight struggle of this globalization era, crisis has to be managed properly (Kriyantono & McKenna, 2019). Public relations must provide information anytime as a result of media scrutiny during the crisis situation, therefore, public relations can be regarded as “a source of ethical statements from organization and the repository of ethical and social policies for the organization”

(Lattimore et al. 2017).

Coombs defined crisis management as “a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damages inflicted... seeks to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis and thereby protect the organization, stakeholders, and/or industry from damage” (Coombs, 2015). Kiambi (2011), defined a crisis as “a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization’s high-priority goals.”

Furthermore, crisis management process should be directed to focus more on the event handling, by handling how public react and perceive toward the event (Fearn-Banks, 2011; Kriyantono, 2015). Coombs viewed crisis as the event that will trigger perception or attributions from the public which is likely to make crisis situation worst (Coombs, 2015). Perception depends on the quantity and quality of information that the public exposed to, therefore, the institution should provide relevant information to control information flows in order to control crisis and should tell the truth and tell it quickly (Zhou & Shin, 2017).

Therefore, Coombs argued that communication is the crucial for crisis management because it collects information, processes it into knowledge, and shares the information with others (Coombs, 2015). Because public relations is a management function in the field of communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) so public relations is crisis manager with its duty to create a system of crisis communication to provide relevant and open information (Kriyantono, Riani, Safitri, 2017). It can be said that ethical crisis communication will be occurred if it is directed as dialogic communication between organization and its public, such as social media and other communication channels (Plessis, 2018).

Furthermore, apologia theory generates the premise that the strategy used by individuals and organizations in responding to crisis tailored to the specific situation faced, namely the type of accusations and the existing facts (Heath, 2013). Some further research clarifies this premise by finding several crisis response strategies in specific situations. Ware and Linkugel (1973) describe denial and

differentiation strategies used if they want to 'clear names', denial and transcendence strategies are used if they want to separate themselves from accusations or scandals, bolstering and differentiation strategies are used if the audience is assumed to understand the motives of individuals or companies so that they cannot blame, and bolstering and transcendence strategies are used to seek audience understanding and approval. Hearit and Brown (2004) explains if accusations made due to incompetence or irresponsible behavior can use a denial, scapegoating, or accident essence dissociation strategy, if the accusations result in hostile individuals can give statements of regret to assuage public anger, and if accused of violating values -the value of the social legitimacy of the strategy used must demonstrate adherence to the values deemed to have been tampered with.

Some studies conclude that individuals or organizations that have been found guilty are less likely to be able to maintain their reputation during a crisis if they use a denial strategy (Kiambi, 2011). On the other hand, several studies (Coombs, 2015) show that denial strategies are effective in protecting reputation because they show the public that no crisis is occurring. Denial strategies are not always unsuccessful to apply, effective denials to maintain reputation during crises in certain scenarios or situations. Towner (2009, h. 439) says that “a denial of an allegation or fact functions as a useful strategy (as long as the truth is not distorted)” (Coombs, 2015).

Coombs (2015) has also proven that individuals or organizations that use denial and are later found not guilty can maintain their good reputation and reduce the level of public anger. Denial is a strategy or claim that is subject to verification, "denial should be effective only if the organization bears no responsibility for the crisis." (Coombs, 2015). It can be concluded that individuals or organizations that are not proven guilty tend to be able to maintain their reputation during a crisis if using a denial strategy.

This current research focuses on the Malang Regency GPR strategy when the Malang Regent was arrested by the Corruption Eradication Commission on October 11, 2018. The Regent became a corruption suspect. This event has the

potential to cause a government crisis that requires a crisis response strategy. The researcher believes that the event can be categorized as a public relations crisis since the event has been already known by the public and has resulted in a negative perception of the Malang Regency, or image of a person, then crisis communication literature is needed in explaining various strategies that can be chosen as strategies to respond to the crisis, between others Corporate Apology, corporate impression management, and image restoration theory (Botan & Hazleton, 2009).

The current research focuses on GPR. GPR is public relations in the environment of government agencies, hereinafter referred to as government public relations, are public relations institutions and/or government public relations practitioners who perform management functions in the field of information and communication that are persuasive, effective, and efficient, to create harmonious relations with the public through various public relations facilities in in order to create a positive image and reputation of government agencies." (the Regulation of the Minister of Administrative Reform and Bureaucratic Reform [Permenpan-RB] No. 31 of 2011 concerning the General Guidelines for Public Relations Infrastructure in Community Institutions).

Based on the description of the linkages of the crisis and Apology theory above, the researcher formulated the hypothesis that the apologia strategy adopted by the GPR, because the organization was considered guilty, tended not to use a denial strategy. This hypothesis needs to be proven by analyzing the contents of the news about the Malang Regent corruption case. The researcher analyzes the statements of the GPR quoted by journalists. This news is called quote-news.

In addition, this current research also explore whether these statements go hand in hand with ethical aspects of public relations. Ethical consideration should be involved in any strategies of crisis management which is a process to anticipate, prepare, and deal with problems caused by crisis (Chen, 2012). Nowadays, the importance of ethics codes have been considered by both academics and practitioners as a basis for conducting

effective public relations (Wilcox & Cameron, 2009). Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman and Toth (2017) argued that the practitioners have an obligation to make decision about the right thing to do in order to build relationship between organization and its publics. In addition to skill and expertise, public relations needs a code of ethics to be a profession. Some public relations practitioners have created their own code of ethics through some professional organizations, such as The Indonesian Public Relations Association. The important of ethics has also realized by academics of around the world in which a number of theories of public relations ethics have been advanced and have been fully developed (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). Hence, the current research aims to explore whether crisis communication strategies from GPR practitioners have mirrored the ethical standard.

Public Relations is an art communicate with the public to build good relations, avoiding misunderstandings, and at the same time build a good image institution (Mardiana & Widiyanto, 2017).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research incorporated content analysis toward 47 online news from, such as detik.com, tribunnews.com, suryamalang, radarmalang, during October and November 2018. Content analysis is a way to learn and analyze communication systematically, objectively, and quantitatively on the message that appears. This quantitative content analysis is done without exploring the motives behind writing news and not taking into account political factors (Wimmer & Dominic, 2011).

This research focuses on quote news by only presenting direct and indirect quotes from the words of the figures involved in an event (Suhandang, 2010) as well as oral statements from organizational staff quoted by the media (Kriyantono, 2016). From individual news statements and institutions contained in the news, their apologies strategy can be seen in responding to the crisis. Through quantitative content analysis, researchers

focus more on visible communication content (explicit or real) (Wimmer & Dominic, 2011).

This study uses a reference analysis unit. According to Kriyantono (2014), researchers record and count a set of words or sentences that display something and have a category meaning in the reference unit. Based on the definition of straight news or direct news, it can be concluded that in the corrupt statements of government officials in online media news there is a news quote which is a quote spoken by a character (Suhandang, 2010).

Content analysis coded apologia strategies from GPR. This study used an analysis unit of reference, through which the researchers collected and calculated a set of words or sentences in accordance with predetermined categories. The research used categories from several research (Cited in Kriyantono, 2019), such as: Denial, bolstering, differentiation and transcendence. Denial had the keywords: refusing, not guilty, not involved, unintentional action, and improper accusation; Bolstering had with the keywords: reminding people of positive contributions, reminding the many accomplishments, responsible but still connecting positive things and emphasizing positive nature to offset the allegations; Differentiation incorporated the keywords: redrawing the events of the crisis, reframing the accusations as positive, influencing people to see their actions from another perspective, asking the community to postpone its assessment until there is evidence; Transcendence included the keywords: define the accusations into the wider context, compare the allegations with the more important value so that the error rate will decrease, and put new facts which benefits him.

Furthermore, the research coded whether the GPR statements as quote-news consist of some ethical standards. Furthermore, the researchers combined standards of ethics from the Indonesian

Public Relations Association as research categories: (A) concern to the public interests; (B) relaying the true information; (C) helping social welfare; (D) protecting the public from physical and psychological harms; (E) protecting the public from economic harm.

Category A consists of sub-categories: fulfilling the public needs and placing the public as priority; category B: based on data; referring to findings; category C: helping the broader society; category D: maintenance, repair psychological and physical damages, and trauma healing; category E: compensation.

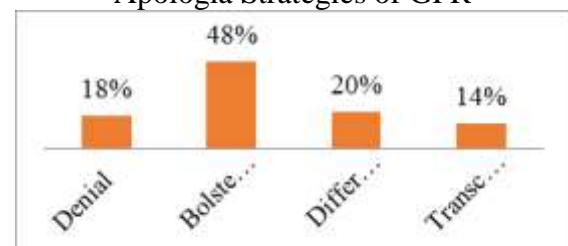
3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general, the research reveals that GPR of Malang Regency applied bolstering strategy (Figure 1). There are 48% of 47 statements contain some important key-words, such as reminding people of positive contributions, reminding the many accomplishments, responsible but still connecting positive things and emphasizing positive nature to offset the allegations. For example:

"I have told all ASNs in Malang Regency, that they must keep their spirits up. Besides, they also must not be affected by my status later," said Rendra Kresna (11/10/2018).

In the second place, it is differentiation in which the strategies incorporate some keywords, such as redrawing the events of the crisis, reframing the accusations as positive, influencing people to see their actions from another perspective, asking the community to postpone its assessment until there is evidence.

Figure 1.
Apologia Strategies of GPR



The differentiation strategy can be seen in the following example:

In addition to revealing his status as a suspect, Rendra also confirmed his resignation as chairman of the Regional Leadership Council (DPW) of the East Java Province Nasdem Party. According to him, the decision to withdraw was made for the good of all. "That (resignation) should be done by cadres who may no longer be able to go all-out because they have to deal with cases like me now," explained Rendra. Rendra said that at a time like this the concentration will be split. With the release of the political position, Rendra hopes to provide the correct answers and information to the KPK during the legal process. "For the good of the party as well as me, I resign from the position of chairman of the DPD Nasdem Party," he said nonchalantly (Radarmalang, 10 Oct 2018).

Touched about the possibility of a political game behind the examination, the man born March 22, 1962 was also reluctant to comment. "No, we should not be prejudiced. If that is indeed a legal issue, let's resolve it with the law," he explained.

In addition, it is revealed that GPR of Malang Regent have conducted crisis communication based on ethical consideration (see Figure 2). All quote news contain of ethical messages appear in the company's statements. It is no wonder that the Malang Regent successfully deals with a crisis and there is no demonstration from the public during the crisis. Ethics is what morally right or wrong in terms of public relations communication messages, usually as determined by standards of profession, organizations, and individuals (Lattimore et al, 2017).

It can be said that public relations of Malang Regent sounds the organizational ideas in public discourses, however, it still adopts the principle of "to be effective each individual or organization needs first to be ethical, good" (Coombs, 2015).

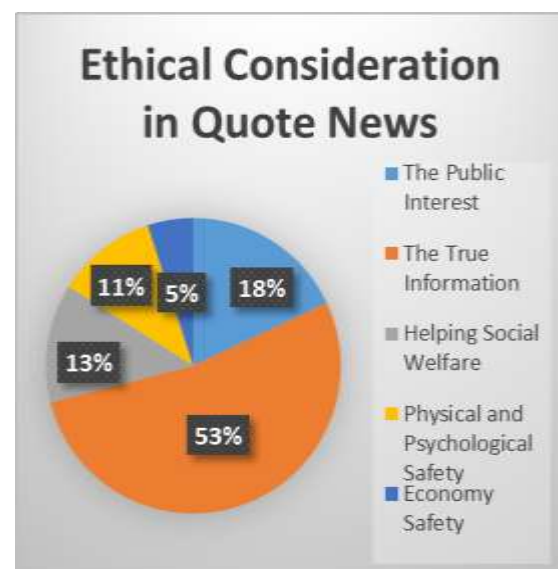
Content analysis finds that relaying true information is mostly appeared in quote-news. There are 53% of 47 quote-news that contain of this standard of ethics. It is followed by the effort to concern the public interests (18%). The lowest rank of ethical standards appeared in quote-news is economy safety (5%).

The researchers believe that the highest rank of relaying true information mirrors to the main principle of public relations: "tell the truth". This principle is rooted from management approach, namely good policy makes good public relations which defines public relations as expressing ideas and policy of the organization (Coombs, 2015; Kriyantono & McKenna, 2019). It allows to let public know about the organization's activities. Relaying information is the effort to reduce lack of information among the public.

This is an example of relaying true information:

"This afternoon, I will lead the meeting. Not to worry. Especially there are indeed a number of activities that must be completed immediately. At the same time I want to convey directly what happened," said Rendra to reporters (9 Oct 2018). "It's smooth, but I want to convey it directly. Not because I'm worried, but I need to explain to them (ASN) and not be affected by the conditions, as well as information from the news they read and see," he said.

Figure 2. Ethical consideration in quote news



In addition, information is crucial to shape positive perception toward the public, thus, it will trigger positive attribution toward the company crisis history and prior relational reputation. Furthermore, the organization's reputation, according to Coombs is also shaped by crisis history and prior relational

reputation. Crisis history occurs when the public perceives that the company has experienced the same situation previously. Coombs called a crisis history "consistency". Prior relational reputation is the public's perception of how the company has cared for the public in previous situations. If the company did not treat the public well on the other occasions, it has a bad prior relational reputation. Coombs called the prior relational reputation "distinctiveness". For example:

"Because, in essence, the regent is not everything. Basically there are also achievements such as achievements and so on. I have conveyed it at the meeting," he said.

From the description above, it is obvious that this theory is closely linked to Weiner's theory of attribution. The Attribution Theory states that a person tends to seek the information about the causes of a negative and unexpected event. The public tends to attribute the responsibility for a crisis situation to a particular person, because it has an emotional response to the crisis. If the institution is attributed as the cause of the event, its reputation will fall and this situation could evoke public anger. As a result, the public will probably avoid interaction with the institution (Coombs, 2015). The need to gain information is the first priority to be accomplished by the company because Apologia suggests that public tends to ask what is going on when the crisis happens.

However, the information must be guaranteed as true and reliable. It means that the information must contain of data and refer to findings. As consequences, the public will give their trust to participate and support the institution action to solve the crisis. The findings also reinforce that the public must be first priority of the institution's activities. Public is not only affected by crisis or affected by the institution's decisions but also a group who becomes more aware and active (Lamme & Russell, 2010).

Even though the true information number is at the top position, however, researchers still find one news quote that has the potential to not contain true information elements. As an example: Malang Regent, Rendra Kresna, has admitted that the search was related to the

20122 education fund and campaign funds. However, Head of Public Relations Malang Regency Government, Tien Fahira, claimed not to know anything. "I do not know," Tien Fahira said by telephone on Monday (8/10/2018) night. When it was more about who was involved and the possibility of who would be caught, Tien returned to the words do not know. "Once again I do not know," he said (Surya Malang, 8 October 2018).

The researcher believes that the above news quotations, in general, do not affect public opinion regarding the performance of the GPR, because only one quote-news like that and quickly replied with other news-quotes that contain elements of public interest, such as the following:

Tien (GPR) emphasizes that the search that he had just learned would not interfere with the operations of the institutions in Malang Regency Government. "Not disturbed, all work after each of their main tasks and functions," he concluded (Surya Malang, 18 Oct 2018).

This comments is also reinforced by other statements:

"However, everything must go on as usual, and improve public services," he added. The Creative Economy Zone (KEK) and the Bromo Tengger Tourism Authority (BOP) are the programs that Rendra ordered Sanusi. "There are three things that are emphasized, namely public services, KEK, and BOP," he explained (Suryamalang, 16 October 2018).

It should be noted that helping the broader society places in the lowest rank indicates that GPR more focus on specific public. Tymson, Lazar & Lazar (2004) suggest to direct communication strategy into specific public because "there is no such thing as general public".

The findings regarding ethical aspects relate to the character GPR according Lee et al. (2012, h. 17): "Government is different. It must be responsive to the public. If a business or non profit opts not to answer the complaint of neighborhood organization, that's legal and ok. But government agencies cannot. That's because their external relationship are not one dimensional, such as with customers or client, and not even with stakeholders. Rather, for a government agency, everybody is a citizen. Even people who are not being serve by an agency have a claim on it. That's the difference between

government and other sectors.”

GPR more often acts as a spokesperson and made a shield if the organization or the company is being confronted with problematic situations rather than having to form a planning used for the achievement of the objectives of the organization or company (Windriati, Darmawan, & Romadhan, 2019).

Serving the public interest is the main function of the GPR. In addition to being in accordance with the formulation of public relations functions according to literature, such as Cutlip, Center, & Broom (2011) and Kriyantono (2017), namely to serve public's interests, to maintain good communication, and to maintain good morals and manners, these functions also as written in Permenpan No 31/2011. In Permenpan no 12/2007, the function of the Government Public Relations is as a spokesperson for institutions, facilitators, providing information services to the public, following up on public complaints, providing information about agency policies, programs, products and services, creating a climate of internal and external relations that is conducive and dynamic, as well as liaising institutions with stakeholders.

This research also shows that GPR needs to pay close attention to communication strategies in responding to crises related to corruption. The problem of corruption often afflicts government organizations lately. Indonesia's corruption index is still low, ranked 37th, which means that corruption is still high. The closer it gets to 100, the less corruption (Kriyantono, Destriy, Amrullah, & Rakhmawati, 2017).

These ethical strategies are also in accordance with the Regulation of the Minister of Administrative Reform and Bureaucratic Reform (*Permenpan-RB*) No 30/2011 Chapter II point D concerning eight general principles of government public relations, namely: openness and objectivity (non-discriminatory, does not cover public information, does not favor one party); Honest (not lying, not cheating, not manipulating tasks); Appropriate promises and accountable (consistent and accountable); Ethical, professional and integrity (based on ethical values, skills, knowledge, high commitment).

Investigation of corruption cases in Indonesia has increased every year, in

2011-2013 the number of cases increased from 699 to 1,696 cases. Whereas in 2016 alone, 573 cases of corruption were recorded which had caused the state losses of Rp 3.08 trillion (Rentjoko, 2017). Although there has been an increase in corruption eradication in the public sector which is indicated by a rise in points, Indonesia's order has in fact dropped two ranks when compared to last year.

Based on the 2016 Indonesian Corruption Watch data, it can be seen that the institutions that commit the most acts of corruption are state apparatus (Egi, 2016). According to Law No. 5 of 2004 concerning State Civil Apparatus (ASN) in chapter 1 article 1, what is meant by state civil apparatus is the profession of civil servants (PNS) and government employees with employment agreements working in government agencies.

The problem of corruption can produce a crisis because it always gets public attention. Apology theory explains this public behavior: the public has a tendency to find out the cause of a behavior he sees; the public seeks information and explains the cause of a behavior systematically; attributes made public will affect each individual's feelings and behavior in the next situation; and the public has reasons to build their impressions or assessments of others (Hearit, 2005).

4. CONCLUSSION

The research findings have confirmed that GPR has adopt ethical aspect of public relations in its communication strategies dealing with the crisis. It allows the company gain awards from international community as the indicator that GPR has been successfully faced the crisis. The research also reinforce that the company will be likely maintain its positive reputation if its communication strategies is directed to focus on the public safety and needs. This study has limitations related to only use a content analysis. It does not focus on how media frames the event and surveying the public opinions. The frame of media and public opinions can be useful to thoroughly evaluate the effectiveness of the company's crisis communication strategies.

Therefore, for further research, data collection techniques need to be done by in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in order to parse the data more thoroughly. Despite its limitations on the generalization, this study is expected to be a pilot project to encourage further research in the future.

The research confirms that the role of the public relations is handling the relationship between organization with its public, but with that simple understanding on eventually caused a lot of confusion even the unclear role of a person real public relations. GPR more often acts as a spokesperson and made a shield if the organization or the company is being confronted with problematic situations rather than having to form a planning used for the achievement of the objectives of the organization or company.

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