
Rural Community Leaders and Development Messages in the Digital Age



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ABSTRACT: Messages for development to reach the general public are conveyed through various channels. In rural communities, community leaders usually play a very important role so that information on developments that are currently and will take place can be known by the community. But in today's digital era where people also have wide and open access by utilizing the internet, it seems as if the role of community leaders is starting to be marginalized. This study aims to explore the role of community leaders in conveying information to the public in the digital era and how the public receives the information they receive. A qualitative study in Pamijahan Village, Bogor, with informants from community and community leaders, shows that community leaders still play a role in conveying information that is considered important by the community and community leaders also try to maximize the internet in conveying information that is useful to the community.

KEYWORDS: digital era, internet, community leaders, development messages

I. INTRODUCTION

The development of a country should be evenly distributed both in urban and rural areas. In simple terms, development is defined as an effort to improve people's lives. This means that development is carried out in an effort to raise people from poverty, low literacy rates. To carry out fair and equitable development, community participation is needed. Community participation in development is somewhat felt in rural areas, where a sense of kinship and mutual cooperation is still maintained and maintained. So that development messages conveyed by the center to the regions should be known by all levels of society, especially people in rural areas.

Development messages are conveyed in the form of communication from the government to the community. Communication is very necessary so that the message can be conveyed properly and on target (Ramah, n.d.). The communication must also be persuasive so that the public can properly receive development information. Development messages can be interpreted in the form of ideas or ideas related to development programs that are useful for improving the social and economic conditions of society (Amanah, 2010; Kustiawan et al., 2023).

One of the media used to convey development messages is through the role of community leaders in rural areas. Community leaders are considered people who can be trusted and a place for discussion for rural communities (Rani, n.d.). So that community involvement to improve a program and goals will be achieved to realize the development that has been planned. Community leaders in rural communities are considered figures who are also able to protect rural communities.

However, in the digital era, many people are connected to the internet so that they can find development messages from various channels and media (Saputra et al., 2020). The internet with all its sophistication and can be used by all levels of society, could replace the role of community leaders (Semolowaru, 2020). It's just that the development messages received by the community can be invalid and hoaxes that develop in society. For this reason, the message of community leaders is felt to be still necessary according to the author.

According to the results of Porawouw's research (2017), the role of community leaders in Duasudara Village, Ranowulu District, Bitung City, has not been as expected in influencing the community so that they can increase their participation in development in the village. The role of community leaders can help the community in understanding the direction and goals of development that is being and will be carried out. However, this research does not discuss the role of community leaders in the current digital era (Porawouw, 2017). Meanwhile, research by Hidayatulloh and Yani (2022) says that in Jogoroto Village, Jombang Regency, there

Rural Community Leaders and Development Messages in the Digital Age

is very little community participation in contributing thoughts, ideas and mutual cooperation in implementing village development; so that the role of village community leaders is needed. It can be seen that community leaders are still very much needed in village development (Hidayatulloh & Yani, 2021). Development in rural areas is also inseparable from community participation. One of the reasons for this participation is the role of community leaders. Community leaders are expected to be able to communicate actively so that community development participation can be active. So according to Kustiawan, et.all (2023), "participatory communication in development has many roles, namely increasing aspirations, there are large changes in mindset, being able to make decisions without riots, and quickly overcoming or identifying problems because there is a participatory development communication process in inside"(Kustiawan et al., 2023). From existing research, it has not been explored what the role of community leaders is in the digital era. According to the researchers, internet media that has reached village communities should be utilized as much as possible for the benefit of village community development. In Pasarean Village, Pamijahan District, Bogor Regency, the community is trying to take an active role in rural development. Development messages are conveyed by people with an interest in village governance assisted by existing community leaders. This study used a qualitative research method, which was conducted in Pasarean Village. The informants in this study were 4 (four) community leaders and 4 (four) community informants who were housewives, teachers and farmers. Data were obtained by conducting in-depth interviews about the role of community leaders in conveying development information and how the community's responses and responses to the role of community leaders were. The data was then analyzed qualitatively. Secondary data was obtained from various articles related to the research theme.Pre-research conducted in June 2023 showed that development messages only reached the community stage such as the *taklim* assembly, *posyandu* and others, not at the grassroots. This is because the distance between villages is quite far, the difficulty of transportation and low community activity. However, with the development of internet media, information dissemination is felt to be better and community leaders are also trying to maximize internet media such as the use of WhatsApp to disseminate information and explore aspirations so that the community plays a role and actively participates in development. It is this background and phenomenon that the researcher then explores further regarding the role of community leaders in conveying development information or messages to the public in the digital era.

II. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Pasarean Village Pasarean Village was established in 1980 with an area of 277,208 Ha. The population is 11,879 people consisting of 6,116 men and 5,760 women with a total of 3,349 families. Pasarean Village has 33 neighborhood association (*RT*), 9 citizens association (*RW*), 2 heads of villages. Pasarean Village was designated as the 3rd Modern Village in the world by UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in 1953. Apart from that, Pasarean Village is known as a Warrior Village with one of the famous warrior figures, *KH. Soleh Iskandar*. Pasarean Village has a village-owned enterprises (*badan usaha milik desa* or *BumDes*) "Young Work" with business units including: waste bank, wedding organizer, creation corner, procurement of goods or services, custom glasses or photo printed glasses. Pasarean Village manages development information through its website with the aim of being a public service medium. This media is entrusted to the Pasarean Village IT team so that development information and public service delivery can be carried out quickly and easily. The Pasarean Village government realizes that its residents cannot access information only through the website, so the information dissemination strategy is also carried out through face-to-face meetings in routine community activities in Pasarean Village, such as recitation activities at the *taklim* assembly, routine activities held by the *PKK* team and *Posyandu*. In addition, the Head of Pasarean Village collaborated with all *RT* Heads, *RW* Heads and *Kadus* in conveying development information in the form of letters or announcements on brochures, posters and other media from both the central and regional governments of Bogor Regency itself. From these problems, the research informants are community leaders and a number of community members from Pasarean Village. The informant profiles in this study are shown in the following table:

Table 1. Informants

No.	Initial	Sex & (Years)	Age	Education	Occupation	Roles
1	LH	Male - 52			Farmer	Community Leader
2	TR	Male - 24		Bachelor	Tutor	Community Leader
3	MF	Male - 50			Village Secretary	Community Leader
4	NR	Male - 53			Head of the Neighborhood	Community Leader
5	SAS	Female - 29		High school	Housewife	Community/villagers
6	MT	Female - 21		High School	Kindergarten Teacher	Community/villagers
7	ST	Female - 30			Head of Neighborhood	Community/villagers
8	SA	Female - 29		Vocation	Housewife	Community/villagers

Source: Research results

Rural Community Leaders and Development Messages in the Digital Age

Table 1 above shows that informants from community leaders are generally male due to the paradigm that men are leaders in the community and it is not known what kind of education they have but are considered influential people in society. Meanwhile, informants from the general public are women with the assumption that women also have to actively participate in rural development.

A. Delivery of Development Messages

After conducting interviews with community leaders, LH said that the development messages he received would soon be conveyed to the community. This is done so that people receive messages quickly. Messages conveyed to the community through routine monthly activities, such as recitations, activities with *RT* who will disseminate information to the community. Meanwhile, according to TL, the messages conveyed are usually through the *RT* head or religious and community leaders. Messages are conveyed using loudspeakers in prayer rooms or mosques. This is done so that important information reaches the community immediately and is usually to invite the community to gather. After the community gathers, then other information is conveyed.

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It was different with MF, who said that "We often inform through monthly authority events such as recitations, meetings with *RT* so that they convey this to the community". This was felt to be quite effective for MF and when there was a predetermined meeting, then the information was conveyed to the public. Meanwhile NL said that he conveyed the information himself to his residents and if there was a routine mutual cooperation event.

Apart from conveying development information and messages directly, community leaders also use existing media such as internet media. As stated by LH "For the influence of the media it is fast enough to convey information, yes, most people now use social media such as tiktok, podcasts and others. Therefore, we in the village are currently doing it like that, so it's very influential, right?" In contrast to TR, where in his village the media that is often used to convey information to residents is through loudspeakers through mosques or prayer rooms, "In here, announcements are made through loudspeakers. If the youth association is through the WhatsApp group. But usually using loudspeakers. Occasionally TR also uses WhatsApp group media to inform news or development messages to the public, but with so many residents who don't have cell phones, word of mouth and loudspeakers are more effective.

MF also believes that in his village, information is also conveyed through media such as Tiktok, Facebook and WhatsApp groups. This is due to the large number of people who use the media and a low reading culture. Communities are better informed by the media than by writing such as letters or local newspapers. For people who don't have cell phones, information is conveyed directly from the *RT* and usually also monthly recitations for ladies and gentlemen. This study is a forum for information on various rural activities and future plans as well.

NR also uses other media to convey information to its citizens. The media in question are whatsapp, Instagram and activities carried out in the village will be uploaded to the village's YouTube channel. According to NR, with the current development of information technology, so that all residents are aware of activities in their village and no activities are hidden and residents in general are aware of all programs in the village. If there are residents who do not access information through online media, routine recitation activities held in the village become a means of conveying information. So the information obtained by residents generally comes from the village head to community leaders.

In conveying development messages from the central government to regional governments to finally the village government where messages are conveyed in various methods, namely conveying messages in stages or directly. Messages delivered in stages usually use several channels, such as messages from the Lurah/Kades head delivered to the RW pack and then continued by the *RT* pack. The message from the *RT* will be disseminated in various ways depending on the intended recipient of the message (message target). If the recipient of the message is aimed at women, then the *RT* usually conveys it through the WA group because women are more active with their cell phones so the message spreads faster. Likewise, if the message is aimed at local village youths, the *RT* tends to choose social media in conveying the message. As for social media that are usually used by pack *RT* such as WAG, tiktok accounts, Facebook and Instagram. One community leader even said that all activities in his village were uploaded via social media YouTube. This was conveyed by NS:

"Nowadays, all institutions should know about activities in the village. The community is given information so that there are no closed activities. Society must know everything. Therefore, the community now knows all the programs in the village because nothing is covered up, they must know".

From the results of interviews conducted with several community leaders, it appears that the media is also influential in conveying development messages from community leaders to their communities (Gallardo et al., 2018). So that the existing internet media is used to convey development messages. For Pasarean Village, tiktok, Facebook and WhatsApp groups are the media used besides

Rural Community Leaders and Development Messages in the Digital Age

conveying development messages directly. Community leaders also understand that people who are unable to access social media or who do not have an Android cellphone are usually used to convey messages directly or verbally and meet directly with residents who live far inland, making it difficult to catch signals.

B. Society and Development Messages

As it is known that the role of community leaders in conveying development messages is very important in rural communities. If there is no role for community leaders, the community will not know and will not play an active role in rural development. Regarding development messages, according to an informant from the community, namely SAS, he was of the opinion that community leaders should be able to deliver them directly to the community. Conveying this message can also be done through the existing community activity cadres, then these cadres will pass it on to the community. This is considered more effective and efficient than using internet media or social media. Regular meetings held in the village were also considered effective by SAS in receiving development information and messages. WhatsApp media is only a bridge, but what is clearer and more complex is the information conveyed directly. Based on information from MT, he gets development messages from the head of the RT and sometimes from the routine recitation activities of the youth in his village. According to MT, the information obtained directly would be clearer than word of mouth among residents. Even though sometimes the chairman uses media such as whatsapp, according to MT, messages delivered directly are more effective.

It is different with ST who believes that the information conveyed in his village is information about meetings delivered via WhatsApp and messages are fully received at meetings which are held routinely every month. If there is urgent information to hold a meeting, then the most effective way is to use WhatsApp. In addition, according to ST, the role of the village head is very important in conveying information to the community. The message conveyed should be direct to avoid misunderstandings in translating what is informed.

Meanwhile, according to SA, the information conveyed in his village is usually through the RT and will later be clarified through regular meetings at the RT such as recitations and other activities. SA also added that the information should be conveyed directly from the village so that there would be no misinformation. This is due to the opinions of different people and can lead to erroneous information received. The media used by village officials is also a source of information for community members. Facebook is one of the channels for updating village information, as stated by SA. Basically, SA hopes that information can be conveyed directly to the community so that the community understands what is being and will be done in their village. Using social media is an option so that information can also spread to the community, but it is constrained by access and the ability of residents to use social media.

In general, from the results of interviews with residents, they think that the media can be used to disseminate information, but the main thing is direct delivery by village officials or community leaders. This is to avoid misunderstandings and the public can ask questions directly if there is something they don't understand. Discussions can also be carried out well if there are regular meetings every month in the community. The purpose of this regular meeting is to convey information about village activities and plans for further activities.

It can be seen that the role of community leaders as opinion leaders is still very important for residents to obtain information about village development. The existence of community leaders is a forum for residents to share, criticize and convey their aspirations about the development of their village. The role of active community participation can be felt from routine meetings held every month. The media also bridges the information conveyed from village officials to the community.

The high public interest in always being connected to social media is a sign of progress in the field of media and technology. Various applications can be downloaded to participate in the frenetic world's messages. Today, the virtual world feels real to its users. Almost all the problems we face we can read and enjoy in cyberspace. This also has an impact on rural communities, especially in terms of accessing information. The role of community leaders in rural areas, which were originally the central 'place to ask questions' or citizen information centers, has now shifted to social media. Even so, the role of community leaders is still needed, especially for rural residents who cannot enjoy social media because of their limitations in mastering communication technology and the availability of facilities and infrastructure. For villagers, gadgets (mobile phones) are a luxury item. Apart from that, the geographic location of the countryside also influences the provision of tower facilities to get internet signals. There are still many other technical obstacles. For this reason, the role of community leaders is still needed in rural areas, although some residents are able to access information through social media.

CONCLUSIONS

The benefits of information technology used to convey development messages are increasingly being felt by the wider community. This is also felt by rural communities where access to information is very easy to obtain through social media. The role of community leaders as information centers for development programs in rural areas is decreasing day by day, especially among young people or students who actively use social media. Access to information from social media cannot be enjoyed by all residents in the village because not all residents have the facilities and infrastructure.

Rural Community Leaders and Development Messages in the Digital Age

Elderly villagers usually still depend on community leaders to access information. This is because these parents do not have mobile devices and are unable to operate them. Another obstacle is internet facilities that are not yet available. Therefore, the role of the Village Head and community leaders is still needed in the delivery and dissemination of development programs.

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