

Public Perception and Digital Pressure on Regional Heads: The Melki Laka Lena Phenomenon

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Abstrak

The transformation of political communication in the digital era has shifted regional leaders from operating solely within bureaucratic structures to navigating rapidly evolving public perceptions shaped by social media. This article examines the dynamics of public perception toward Melki Laka Lena as the Governor of East Nusa Tenggara by employing three main frameworks: media logic to understand how political communication becomes increasingly symbolic and easily circulated, affective publics to explain the role of emotions, satire, and public disappointment in digital conversations, and network society to analyze how meanings of leadership are reproduced through digital user networks. This study uses a qualitative case study approach through textual-multimodal reading and digital discourse analysis of social media posts, screenshots of public conversations, and comment sections. The findings reveal that public perception is shaped more by communication symbols, visual representations, collective emotions, and online interactions than by substantive discussions of government policies. Social media has ultimately evolved into a space where digital pressure and public perception toward regional leaders are continuously constructed.

Keywords: Public Perception, Digital Political Communication, Media Logic, Affective Publics, Melki Laka Lena

INTRODUCTION

Political communication has undergone significant changes since digital platforms became the primary space for public information exchange. While previously regional heads primarily engaged in official speeches, press conferences, or media coverage, today the relationship between the government and the public increasingly takes place through online channels such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. This shift has enabled the flow of political communication to move more quickly, openly, and directly reach the public without intermediaries. In this situation, regional heads no longer operate solely within the government bureaucracy but also within a constantly evolving ecosystem of public discourse. The presence of digital platforms has ultimately shifted the pattern of political communication from formal and one-way communication to a more interactive and less fully controlled by the government.

This shift in public communication patterns has also influenced the way politics is presented to the public. David L. Altheide (2004) explains that media logic is "a form of communication" that determines how events are selected, packaged, and presented to fit the media's rhythm. Within this logic, political communication no longer operates primarily through lengthy and administrative explanations, but through a form of delivery that is quickly recognized, easily understood, and able to capture the attention of the audience. Mazzoleni (2014) calls this condition the mediatization of politics, a situation where political actors increasingly adapt to the needs of the media to maintain relevance in public life. As a result,

political communication increasingly depends on a leader's ability to present themselves according to the rhythm and needs of contemporary media.

The way politics is presented to the public is increasingly influenced by algorithmic systems operating in the digital space. Klinger and Svensson (2015) explain that digital information flows through network media logic, a communication pattern influenced by user interaction and algorithmic mechanisms that determine the visibility of content. In this situation, the distribution of attention is no longer entirely under the control of the government or the mass media, but is largely determined by the level of user engagement in the digital ecosystem. Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) explain that digital platforms operate through data and engagement systems, so that content with high responses tends to achieve wider reach. As a result, political communication increasingly relies on a message's ability to survive in the flow of algorithmic attention.

The consequence of this situation is that it is increasingly difficult for governments to fully control the meaning of political messages circulating in the public sphere. Information initially conveyed as part of government communication can transform into criticism, satire, or debate after being reproduced by social media users. The public no longer plays the role of mere recipients of information, but also participates in cutting, sharing, interpreting, and commenting on political messages based on their own social experiences. As a result, regional head communication no longer flows linearly from the government to the public, but rather through a continuous process of negotiation of meaning within the flow of online conversations. This situation places regional governments under far more complex communication pressures than conventional political communication patterns.

This communication pressure is evident in the dynamics of regional leadership in Indonesia, including the political communication phenomenon of Melki Laka Lena as Governor of East Nusa Tenggara. In this context, regional heads are no longer viewed merely as administrative officials, but also as representatives of community hopes for social change and regional development. These hopes arise because the people of East Nusa Tenggara still face various issues that continue to attract public attention, ranging from access to clean water and healthcare in remote areas, limited infrastructure between regions, and the high number of migrant workers. Data from the Central Statistics Agency of East Nusa Tenggara Province in 2024 shows that the average length of schooling for NTT residents remains at 8.72 years, while the expected length of schooling is 13.31 years. The geographical challenges of the archipelago also result in uneven distribution of development across regions. In such a situation, Melki's leadership representation in the public sphere becomes highly sensitive, as the public tends to associate every form of political communication with their hopes for desired social change.

Amidst this situation, social media also magnifies the role of emotions in digital political communication. Papacharissi (2015) explains the concept of affective publics as digital publics formed through emotional attachment to a particular issue. In these conditions, people do not always enter the political sphere through rational argumentation, but also through feelings of anger, disappointment, hope, and social experiences shared on social media. Brady et al. (2021) show that expressions of moral outrage on social media are amplified by digital interactions and feedback from other users, making emotions more easily spread collectively. Brady et al. (2023) also found that social media users often overperceive public outrage, making the digital space appear more conflictual than it actually is. This situation shows that digital political communication is not only influenced by information, but also by the circulation of public emotions in online conversations.

Besides being influenced by collective emotions, digital political communication also operates within the structure of a networked society. Manuel Castells (2009) explains that in a networked society, communication power no longer rests solely with official institutions but is spread across digital networks involving media outlets, content creators, influencers, anonymous accounts, and digital platform users. In *Communication Power*, Castells asserts that "the media have become the space where power strategies are played out." This statement demonstrates that the digital space has evolved into a primary arena for the struggle for political meaning in the era of networked communication. In such a situation, representations of leadership are no longer solely shaped by the government but continue to evolve through public conversations that develop within the digital space. This condition is evident in the dynamics of Melki Laka Lena's political communication, where various representations of leadership can quickly transform into public debates within the online conversation stream. As a result, the political communication of regional heads is increasingly influenced by the dynamics of digital networks that operate beyond the government's control.

Changes in digital political communication have also attracted the attention of various studies in recent years. Several studies have shown that social media is no longer solely used as a channel for government communication, but also influences the formation of public attention, political perceptions, and power dynamics in the digital space. Johansson and Johansson (2023) explain that modern government communication is increasingly tied to the rhythm of digital media and the ever-changing demands for public visibility. At the same time, Riedl, Lukito, and Woolley (2023) show that political opinion on social media is now shaped not only by official institutions but also by content creators, political influencers, and conversations between digital platform users. Research by Brady et al. (2021; 2023) and Humprecht et al. (2023) also shows that social media interactions tend to amplify public emotions, conflict, and emotional political responses. In a national context, various studies on regional head communication also show that visual symbols, virality, and netizen engagement increasingly influence the representation of regional leadership in the media, but are also influenced by content creators, political influencers, and conversations between digital platform users. Research by Brady et al. (2021; 2023) and Humprecht et al. (2023) also show that social media interactions tend to amplify public emotions, conflict, and emotional political responses. In a national context, various studies on regional head communication also show that visual symbols, virality, and netizen engagement increasingly influence the representation of regional leadership in the digital space.

Despite this, previous research has largely positioned social media as a tool for political communication and a platform for shaping government image. This study begins from a different perspective, viewing social media as a platform that contributes to the pressures placed on regional heads through the flow of digital attention, public perception, and the ever-changing dynamics of online conversations. Within this context, this study examines not only how regional heads use social media but also how symbols of leadership are reproduced, debated, and reinterpreted by the digital public. Thus, this study offers a more contextualized understanding of regional political communication in the digital era, particularly in examining how regional heads face the pressures of public perceptions formed through social media.

Based on this description, this study aims to understand how public perception of regional heads is formed under pressure from social media, algorithms, and the dynamics of digital conversations. The research focuses on the political communication phenomenon of Melki Laka Lena, Governor of East Nusa Tenggara, in the social media space. This study does not aim to defend or attack a particular figure, but rather to examine the changing relationship

between the government, the public, and social media when regional heads no longer operate solely within the government bureaucracy but also under the pressure of digital perceptions that constantly shift in the online public space.

METODE

This research employs a qualitative case study method with a textual-multimodal reading approach and digital discourse analysis. The case study method was used to deeply understand the dynamics of public perception of Melki Laka Lena as Governor of East Nusa Tenggara in the digital space. Research data were obtained from posts, screenshots of public conversations, and digital comment spaces related to the representation of regional leadership on social media. The data are read as digital communication documents that demonstrate how symbols of leadership are produced, debated, and reinterpreted in online public conversations.

Multimodal reading is used because the meaning of digital communication is not only formed through verbal text, but also through visuals, conversational context, humor, and interactions between users on digital platforms. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) explain that the meaning of communication is constructed through various interconnected modes of representation, not just through written language alone. In the context of social media, this approach is important because digital conversations work through a combination of text, images, symbols, comments, and user responses that collectively form meaning. This approach is also in line with the research of Samantha Hautea et al., which emphasizes that reading digital platforms requires attention to the relationship between text, visuals, and the dynamics of interaction in shaping the meaning of digital communication.

The research analysis focuses on representations of leadership, the dynamics of public emotions, and patterns of public criticism and response in the digital space. This study does not view the data as a complete representation of public opinion in NTT, but rather as part of the dynamics of digital conversations developing on social media. To maintain analytical depth, the data were triangulated with various literature on media logic, affective publics, network society, and digital political communication. Ethically, account identities are not presented systematically because the research focuses on discourse patterns and communication dynamics, rather than the personal identities of social media users.

HASIL DAN PEMBAHASAN

Research result

The research findings show that public perception of Melki Laka Lena in the digital space is shaped more through communication symbols and visual representations than through substantive discussions of regional government policies. In the various posts and comments analyzed, the governor's figure is more often discussed through ceremonial activities, symbols of closeness, and snippets of daily activities, which are then reproduced in the form of satire, humor, and public criticism. One post even called Melki Laka Lena a "PROFESSIONAL RIBBON CUTTER" and an "UNMATCHED IMAGE MAESTRO," while several other comments questioned the effectiveness of these communication symbols amidst the social problems still facing the people of East Nusa Tenggara. Some comments also insinuated that the government is more preoccupied with building an image than bringing about changes directly felt by the public. This situation demonstrates that the political communication of regional heads in the digital space is increasingly susceptible to shifting meaning when faced with the logic of social media attention and conversations between digital platform users. Communication symbols that initially presented as representations of leadership can quickly

transform into material for evaluation, satire, and even symbolic delegitimization in online public conversations.

This pressure of digital perception is also evident in the way people connect government communication symbols to various social issues they experience daily. In the comments section, criticism of Melki Laka Lena extends beyond ceremonial activities, expanding into conversations about hospitals deemed under-performing, road conditions, education, the local economy, and even unemployment and poverty in East Nusa Tenggara. Some commenters even consider symbols like "walking to work" to be merely visual displays that disregard the complexity of regional issues. These findings demonstrate that the digital space has evolved into a medium for venting public unrest toward local governments. Public conversation no longer revolves around a simple response to a single post but has become an arena where people connect symbols of leadership with hopes for more concrete social change. In this context, digital pressure on regional heads is formed through the accumulation of public perceptions that continuously shift within the flow of online conversations.

Table 1. Categories of Findings of Public Conversations about Melki Laka Lena on Social Media

No	Findings Category	Forms of Public Conversation	Dominant Indications
1	Satire and symbolic delegitimization	"Ribbon cutter", "walk to work", "image maestro"	Criticism of ceremonial communication
2	Criticism of government performance	Infrastructure, hospitals, education, waste, unemployment	Dissatisfaction with social change
3	Comparison between regional heads	Dedi Mulyadi, Sherly Tjoanda, other governors	Expectations regarding leadership style
4	Digital public emotions	Angry, cynical, disappointed, humorous, satirical	Collective emotional conversation
5	Counter-narratives and defenses	Regional debt, fiscal limitations, governance processes	An attempt to provide context for public criticism

Source: Data Processing (2026)

This study also found that public perception of regional heads is increasingly influenced by visual and symbolic comparisons with other leaders active on social media. Names such as Dedi Mulyadi and Sherly Tjoanda appeared repeatedly in comments as comparisons regarding communication styles and representations of regional leadership. In various comments, regional heads are judged not only on policies or work programs, but also on their ability to build an impression of responsiveness, closeness to the community, and perceived digital activity. This situation suggests that social media is contributing to the formation of new standards in how society evaluates regional leaders. Public perception moves through visual impressions, content snippets, and the intensity of regional head appearances in daily digital conversations. As a result, regional heads' political communication is increasingly influenced by their ability to maintain a positive representation amidst the constant flow of public attention and comparison in the digital space.

On the other hand, this study also found counter-narratives that attempted to provide context for the state of regional governance. Several social media users stated that development issues in East Nusa Tenggara could not be resolved quickly due to budget constraints, the geographical conditions of the archipelago, and long-standing structural issues. While not as numerous as critical and satirical comments, their presence demonstrates that public discourse in the digital space is not entirely homogeneous. The comment space exhibits a tug-of-war between criticism, anger, humor, advocacy, and attempts to rationalize the state of regional

governance. These findings demonstrate that social media has evolved into an arena for negotiating public perceptions of regional leaders, as the meaning of leadership is continually reproduced through interactions between users in digital conversations.

Discussion

This research shows that the political legitimacy of regional heads in the digital era increasingly depends on the dynamics of public conversations in digital spaces rather than formal bureaucratic communication processes. In this situation, political communication moves through how the public reads, interprets, and reproduces the representation of a regional head in the flow of online conversations. This change demonstrates that the relationship between government and society is undergoing a major shift because the public now has a much more active position in shaping the image, atmosphere, and direction of discussions regarding a regional leader. This condition shows how communication power in a networked society increasingly moves through horizontal interactions between digital users, as explained by Castells (2009) in the concept of network society. As a result, political legitimacy becomes more fluid and easily changes according to the rhythm of public attention, emotions, and interactions in digital spaces. Digital spaces have ultimately developed into a crucial arena in the formation of the legitimacy of regional political leadership.

These changes also demonstrate that people now consume politics more through quick impressions, symbolic proximity, and emotional engagement than through lengthy and administrative policy explanations. This demonstrates how the logic of digital media drives politics to operate through symbols, quick attention, and visual representations that easily attract public responses, as explained by Altheide (2004) through the concept of media logic. In the digital communication flow, the public responds more easily to visual impressions, snippets of events, and emotional atmospheres than to complex political arguments. This condition also demonstrates how the flow of public emotions has become a crucial part of digital political communication, as explained by Papacharissi (2015) through the concept of affective publics. Therefore, regional heads are increasingly required to build communication that is more contextual, responsive, and able to connect with people's daily social experiences, rather than simply presenting communication symbols that are easily reproduced in the digital space.

The increasing intensity of digital conversations also demonstrates a shift in how people consume and evaluate politics on social media. The public is increasingly accustomed to responding to leadership through visuals, communication symbols, and the fast-moving emotional atmosphere of the digital space. In this environment, assessments of regional heads are often shaped by virality, fleeting impressions, and the intensity of public conversations, rather than a more comprehensive understanding of the realities of local governance. This phenomenon demonstrates that digital communication flows encourage people to engage emotionally rather than reflectively in responding to political issues on social media. As a result, communication symbols are often immediately interpreted as image-building or failure, without considering the broader social context, bureaucracy, or complexity of regional issues.

This situation demonstrates the importance of developing a more critical and contextual public perspective when reading political communication in the digital age. The public needs to recognize that social media often operates through fragmented information, virality, and emotional currents that do not always present a complete picture of the reality of regional governance. Therefore, assessments of regional heads should not be formed solely on the basis of a single symbol, a single post, or a single viral conversation, but also through an understanding of the more complex social context, bureaucratic processes, and development

realities. In situations like this, digital literacy is crucial to prevent the public from easily falling into a culture of instant judgment, which can make the public increasingly emotional and hinder more substantive political discussions.

In this context, local governments also need to understand that political communication in the digital era is no longer sufficient through formal and symbolic communication patterns alone. Regional heads are required to build more substantive, consistent communication that is able to connect with the community's daily social experiences. The findings of this study demonstrate that pressures on public perception in the digital space do not emerge suddenly, but develop through the accumulation of social experiences, collective emotions, and digital conversations that are continuously reproduced by the public. Therefore, local government communication needs to be directed not only at maintaining political visibility but also rebuilding public trust through communication that is more contextual and responsive to the community's social realities. Although this study still has limitations in the amount of data, observation space, and the focus of the platforms used, it demonstrates the importance of understanding local political communication as a dynamic relationship between the government, the community, and digital communication flows. These findings emphasize that local political communication in the digital era is no longer solely concerned with the delivery of government information, but also concerns the government's ability to build social relationships that are more adaptive to the ever-changing dynamics of public conversation.

CONCLUSION

The political communication phenomenon of Melki Laka Lena demonstrates that regional heads in the digital era face not only the demands of government bureaucracy but also the pressures of public perception that constantly shift through online conversations, collective emotions, and the flow of digital attention. Under these conditions, communication symbols that were initially administrative in nature can quickly transform into criticism, satire, and public debate when confronted with social unrest. This situation demonstrates that regional political communication is now increasingly influenced by how the public interprets, compares, and reproduces representations of leadership in the digital space. As a result, the legitimacy of regional heads has become more fluid as they constantly shift according to the dynamics of public attention and perception in the rapid flow of digital communication.

This research demonstrates that social media has evolved into an arena for exerting political pressure on regional heads through symbols, public emotions, and collective digital conversations. In this context, local government communication must not only focus on conveying information and symbolic imagery, but also on understanding the dynamics of ever-changing public perceptions in the digital space. Although this research is limited by the amount of data and observation space used, it demonstrates the importance of interpreting regional political communication as a process of negotiating meaning between the government, the public, and digital communication flows. Therefore, future research can be developed through cross-platform analysis and broader digital observations to better understand the dynamics of regional political communication in the digital era.

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