

Between Social Media And Face-To-Face Interaction: Social Practices Of Post-Disaster Rural Communities (A Study Of Bulukerto Village, Batu City)

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ABSTRACT: In disaster studies, social media is often positioned as a significant medium for communication and coordination during various phases of a disaster. However, this assumption often overlooks the social context of local communities, particularly rural communities. This article aims to understand the social practices of post-disaster rural communities in interpreting and using social media by positioning communication as part of the interactions embedded in the community's social structure. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach and was conducted in Bulukerto Village, Batu City, which was affected by flash floods in 2021. Data were collected through field observations, in-depth interviews with residents and local actors, and secondary data in the form of documentation and village social media materials. The analysis was conducted by positioning communication practices as social practices embedded in the relationships, beliefs, and collective experiences of the community. The results show that although most residents have access to social media, face-to-face communication remains the dominant practice in responding to post-disaster situations. Direct interaction is perceived as having stronger social legitimacy in building trust, strengthening solidarity, and mobilizing collective action. Social media functions in a limited and complementary manner, primarily as a means of practical post-disaster coordination and as a space for personal expression, without developing into the primary arena for disaster communication. These findings confirm that post-disaster communication practices are contextual and strongly influenced by local social structures. This article contributes to the sociology of disaster by demonstrating the limitations of social media in rural community contexts and emphasizing the importance of social relations and community solidarity in the post-disaster recovery process.

Keywords: disaster communication; social media; rural communities; sociology of disaster.

1. Introduction

As part of the 'Ring of Fire' region, Indonesia is a disaster-prone country. From a geological perspective, Indonesia is located at the convergence of four major tectonic plates: the Eurasian, Indo-Australian, Philippine, and Pacific plates. This condition makes Indonesia vulnerable to disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions (Adi et al., 2022; Nugroho, 2018). Unfortunately, despite living in a disaster-prone country, the Indonesian population still has a relatively low level of preparedness. Disaster risk continues to increase as disaster events occur more frequently. Growing environmental damage caused by the increasing human exploitation of nature also contributes to heightened disaster risk (Pramono, 2016). To date, compared with other

disasters such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and tsunamis, floods remain the most prevalent type of disaster in Indonesia (BNPB, 2022). Year-to-year data also show that floods consistently constitute the most frequent disaster in Indonesia (Annur, 2023; BNPB, 2022). Development that fails to consider environmental impacts, together with climate change that makes weather and seasons increasingly difficult to predict, causes disasters to occur even in areas with no previous disaster experience. This is exemplified by the case of Bulukerto Village, Batu City.

In November 2021, the public was shocked by news reports of a disaster in Batu City. Conventional mass media, digital media, and social media circulated reports showing flash floods in Batu City that destroyed residents' houses, agricultural land, livestock, and infrastructure, and also claimed lives (Manumoyoso, 2021; Riski, 2021). As a result of the incident, ten people died and several residents were injured (Kurniawan, 2021). The flash flood affected several villages in Bumiaji District, namely Sumber Brantas Village, Bulukerto Village, Tulung Rejo Village, Padang Rejo Village, Sido Mulyo Village, and Punten Village (CNN Indonesia, 2021). Bulukerto Village experienced the most severe flooding compared with the other villages. The situation became increasingly difficult because local residents had not anticipated that flooding would occur in their residential area. Previously, residents of Bulukerto Village had never experienced a flash flood. According to one informant, although the area is traversed by the Brantas River, during the rainy season the water level usually reaches only ankle height.

When a disaster occurs, a sociological perspective asks how humans or groups of humans respond to such an event (Pramono, 2016). From this perspective, a disaster is an event in which a community or its sub-units, such as communities or regions, experience damage, losses, and disruption to routine functions (Peek et al., 2021). In facing disasters, communication becomes important. Various studies have demonstrated the relevance of communication to a community's ability to face and recover from disasters (Adhrianti & Budiman, 2022; Fauzi & Rusdy, 2020; Hazarika et al., 2021; Khumairoh et al., 2021; Kriyantono, 2019; Widyastuti, 2021). Disaster studies over the last decade have also shown a shift in orientation, from a stronger focus on technical issues related to disaster-triggering events and the handling of victims toward more

human- and community-centered approaches (Pramono, 2016). Communication practices within communities during and after disasters are important as processes of information exchange that can connect affected individuals, strengthen social cohesion, attract attention, and enable assistance from external parties, including donations and moral support.

In disaster communication, media plays a central role. During disasters, media is important for disseminating accurate and responsible information in order to reduce the impacts arising from disasters across all phases: mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery (Widyastuti, 2021). The development of information and communication technology has introduced the role of new media, including social media, in disaster communication. As a new element in disaster management, new media and social media can provide new data sources and real-time information from the field (Widyastuti, 2021). Social media has functioned as a powerful tool for emergency management and disaster relief in many recent emergency situations worldwide, including in Indonesia (Adhrianti & Budiman, 2022; Hazarika et al., 2021; Lovari & Bowen, 2020; Ras Amanda Gelgel, 2020; Widyastuti, 2021). These studies empirically demonstrate how social media across all disaster phases provides specific and timely information as a communication channel for institutions and communities, while also mobilizing local, national, and international support and assistance (Hazarika et al., 2021). The shift from conventional mass media to new media, including social media, has made it possible for disaster-related information to be disseminated by anyone, not only by formal institutions such as the government and the press.

Based on this phenomenon, this study seeks to explore whether, amid current technological developments, the community in Bulukerto Village has used social media as a means of communication and information dissemination in the post-disaster context, as well as the nature of this practice. Bulukerto Village was selected as the research location because the village had no previous historical experience of disaster, making it important to examine the local community's response to disaster, particularly in relation to communication practices and the use of social media.

2. METHOD

This research was conducted using a descriptive qualitative method from April to October 2023. Data were collected through fieldwork at the disaster site, namely Bulukerto Village, Batu City. The researcher observed local community life and communication patterns practiced through social media, particularly in relation to the dissemination of disaster-related information. In addition, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with informants. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, and the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. Furthermore, the researcher used secondary data in the form of mass media coverage of the flash flood disaster in Bulukerto Village, social media posts by the Bulukerto Village Government, and previous studies related to the use of social media in disaster communication. All informants in this study were residents of Bulukerto Village and had experience with the chronology of the 2021 flash flood or post-flood response efforts.

3. Results And Discussion

1) Dominance of Direct Face-to-Face Interaction Amid the Prevalence of Social Media Use

In this study, the informants stated that local residents had never anticipated that a flash flood with such a large volume of water would occur. Based on this geographical background, both GL and FM admitted that they initially found it difficult to believe the news that a flash flood had occurred in their village. When the flash flood occurred in 2021, GL and FM were not in Bulukerto Village. When they received information from local residents and family members, it had never crossed their minds that a flash flood could occur and even sweep away residents' houses. This is consistent with FM's statement that the geographical conditions had led residents to assume that a flash flood would not occur in Bulukerto Village. GL added that even village elders had never experienced such flooding. He stated:

"Because our river, the river in Bulukerto, is a dead river. Water flows only when it rains and from community waste. Because of that, the community downstream had no anticipation of flash floods." (Interview with GL, 2023)

The informants revealed that before the flash flood occurred, disaster awareness programs for the Bulukerto Village community had been organized by various institutions, such as the Village Government, City Government, and the Regional Disaster Management Agency (BPBD). Nevertheless, these programs did not automatically generate strong enthusiasm among residents to actively participate in disaster prevention activities. ZM stated that, although many people had joined the WhatsApp group of the Disaster-Prone Care Forum (FPRB) of Bulukerto Village, only a few were genuinely active in disaster-related activities. One important organization in Bulukerto Village, Karang Taruna, represented by FM, also stated that to date Karang Taruna does not yet have a special division for disaster management.

"In Karang Taruna, frankly, there is no division for that (disaster prevention). It exists in the FPRB." (Interview with FM, 2023)x

Nevertheless, the youth in Karang Taruna remained actively engaged in flash flood response efforts and coordinated through social media, particularly WhatsApp. This provided sufficient efficiency at a time when access routes, such as roads and bridges, had been cut off by the flood. However, FM stated that subsequent coordination and mobilization were conducted through face-to-face interaction rather than through social media-mediated meetings.

In disaster communication, social media can perform several functions, one of which is disseminating disaster-related information to external parties. This is consistent with several disaster events, both natural disasters and social disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic, in which residents used social media to disseminate important information about disaster prevention and response, including efforts to obtain assistance from various parties (Kartika, 2021; Wahyuningsih & Suswanta, 2021; Widyastuti, 2021). As stated by Widyastuti, communication strategies using new media and social media constitute an alternative form of communication in crisis and disaster situations (Widyastuti, 2021). Referring to the period shortly after the flash flood, FM stated that rather than documenting and broadcasting the disaster situation, Karang Taruna members focused more on direct action in disaster response, including optimizing public kitchens for the needs of victims. In this context, social media did not function as a channel for real-time information from the field.

Meanwhile, in relation to the daily activities of the informants in this study, they stated that communication about disasters or interpersonal persuasive appeals among residents to participate in disaster mitigation activities were predominantly conducted face-to-face. As ZM explained, she often persuaded residents to be active in disaster-related activities, such as training or river tracing, through direct face-to-face forums such as PKK activities, village forums, or visits to neighbors. NL also revealed that, so far, there has been no initiative to create social media accounts specifically dedicated to socialization regarding the environment, including disaster issues.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the local community does not use social media at all in disaster-related activities. MW stated that during the flash flood, Facebook was used by the Village Head to disseminate information and post-flood documentation. However, the use of social media can be described as minimal and not commensurate with mitigation and response efforts conducted through direct interaction. MW revealed that, so far, social media has mostly been used as a tool for self-expression. Observations of the village's official social media accounts, Instagram and YouTube, also show that posts are more oriented toward several aspects, namely tourism promotion, documentation of arts and culture, Village Government work programs, and village achievements.

From a sociological perspective, post-disaster communication cannot be understood merely as a process of information delivery, but rather as a social practice embedded and embodied in community relations, norms, and structures. The dominance of face-to-face interaction in post-flash flood community interaction in Bulukerto Village reflects the strong role of social relations in responding to crisis situations. Direct interaction functions as the primary medium not because technology is absent, but because such communication is attached to trust, social proximity, and shared lived experience as one community. Therefore, the community's choice to rely more on face-to-face communication indicates that social relations function as the main capital in facing disasters. Physical presence enables residents to confirm information with one another, share emotions, and build a sense of collective security. In post-disaster situations

marked by uncertainty, such communication practices play an important role in maintaining social cohesion and strengthening community solidarity.

Based on the informants' statements, which do not deny the function of social media, the use of social media in this context does not replace existing social relations but instead appears as an additional social space with limited functions. WhatsApp and other social media platforms are used mainly for practical coordination and personal expression, while collective decisions and social actions remain mediated by direct interaction. This finding shows that digital technology is integrated into an already established social structure, not the other way around.

The relatively new experience of disaster for the Bulukerto Village community also influences how residents interpret and practice post-disaster communication. The absence of historical experience in facing flash floods causes residents to rely more on previously established relationship networks. Under these conditions, local knowledge, informal authority, and kinship relations play important roles in directing collective action. Thus, communication practices function not only in information delivery but also in negotiating the meaning of disaster and determining the forms of response considered most socially appropriate.

From the perspective of disaster sociology, this finding demonstrates that community responses to disasters are contextual and influenced by local social structures. Findings from other studies show that social capital in the form of networks, norms, and trust plays an important role in strengthening community resilience to disasters, especially in rural areas where informal social relations are highly dominant in post-disaster collective coordination (Partelow, 2021). In addition, other research has found that community bonds often become the main mechanism in resilience processes and community cooperation during crisis situations (Zhao et al., 2025). These findings are consistent with this study, in which disasters are understood not only as natural events but also as social events that test and simultaneously reaffirm social relations within the community. In the context of Bulukerto Village, the dominance of face-to-face communication demonstrates that solidarity and social attachment constitute the main foundation of the post-disaster recovery process.

2) Social Media as a Social Space Embedded in Community Structure

Rather than being understood as a stand-alone communication instrument, social media in this study is more appropriately positioned as a social space embedded in the practices and structure of the village community. The use of social media by the Bulukerto Village community cannot be separated from pre-existing social relations, including local organizational structures such as the Disaster-Prone Care Forum (FPRB), Karang Taruna, and the roles of informal actors at the village level.

Social media is used particularly at certain moments, such as post-disaster coordination and the dissemination of documentation by formal actors such as the Village Head. However, the absence of initiatives to make social media a dedicated space for disaster communication shows that such a practice has not been considered an urgent social need. This demonstrates that the adoption of digital technology is strongly influenced by its relevance to the community's needs and social experiences. Furthermore, the use of social media in post-disaster recovery as a complementary communication tool reaffirms that bonding social capital through direct contact is often more important in building collective responses than digital interaction alone (Zhao et al., 2025).

In daily practice, social media functions more as a means of self-expression, entertainment, and interpersonal communication than as the main arena for forming collective awareness regarding disasters. This finding indicates that the meaning of social media is shaped through the community's social practices and is not determined solely by its technological potential. Thus, social media becomes part of residents' social life, but it does not automatically become the primary medium in responding to crisis situations.

4. CONCLUSION

This study finds that post-disaster communication practices in Bulukerto Village cannot be separated from the social structure and community relations that were established before the disaster occurred. Although social media has become part of the daily life of the village

community, its presence does not automatically replace communication practices based on direct interaction. In the post-disaster context, face-to-face communication becomes the most relied-upon medium because it is attached to trust, social proximity, and strong social legitimacy at the community level. The dominance of face-to-face communication reflects the fact that community responses to disasters are contextual social practices. Disasters are understood not only as natural events but also as social events that test community relations, solidarity, and collective capacity. Under conditions of uncertainty and limited historical experience in facing disasters, the Bulukerto Village community relies more on social relationship networks, local actors, and knowledge rooted in shared lived experience.

Social media in this study functions as a complementary social space. Its use is limited to practical post-disaster coordination and personal expression, without developing into the main arena for disaster communication. This finding confirms that digital technology is adopted and interpreted according to the community's social needs, not merely according to its technological potential. Thus, social media cannot be understood as a universal solution in disaster contexts, but rather as part of social practices embedded in the local community structure. Sociologically, this study confirms the importance of a context-sensitive approach in disaster studies. Efforts to strengthen community capacity in facing disasters cannot focus only on providing technology or improving digital literacy, but must also consider the strengthening of social relations, trust, and community solidarity. By presenting the perspective of post-disaster rural communities, this article is expected to enrich disaster sociology studies in Indonesia and open space for discussion regarding the role of social practices in the post-disaster recovery process. The findings of this study confirm that disaster studies need to position social practices and community relations at the center of analysis, particularly in the context of rural communities whose social dynamics differ from those of urban areas.

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