The Role of Public Relations Practitioners in Improving the Service Quality of Universitas Sebelas Maret

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ABSTRACT

Public relations officers are functional officials given full duties, responsibilities, authorities, and rights to carry out information service and public relations activities—planning, information services, implementation of internal and external relations, public relations communication audits, and development of information and public relations services. However, the duties and functions of the public relations of Universitas Sebelas Maret (UNS) are only limited to information service activities, implementation of internal and external relations, and developing information and public relations services. Meanwhile, planning and auditing public relations communication activities have not been facilitated. This study aims to determine the extent of the role and constraints faced by the public relations of UNS in carrying out its functions at the technical and managerial levels. The research results are expected to improve the functions and service quality of the public relations of UNS, especially at the planning stage.

Keywords: Communication Planning; Public Relations; Colleges

1. INTRODUCTION

Regulation of the Minister for Empowerment of State Apparatus and Bureaucratic Reform of the Republic of Indonesia Number 6 of 2014 concerning Functional Positions of Government Public Relations and Credit Scores formulates Government Public Relations as officials given full duties, responsibilities, authorities, and rights to carry out information and public relations service activities. The activities cover planning, information services, internal and external relations implementation, public relations communication audits, and developing information and public relations services.

To optimize the role of public relations and information services, Universitas Sebelas Maret University (UNS) assigns one education staff in each faculty or work unit as public relations executive, being part of the university's public relations team. The relationship between faculty/unit public relations officers, the Technical Implementation Unit (UPT) of Public Relations and Media, and stakeholders can be described as follows.
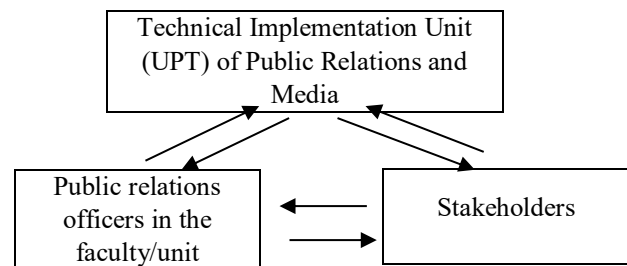

Figure 1. Information and Public Relations Service Flow

One of the acknowledgments of the performance of the UNS public relations team is the Public Relations Award for Public University for four consecutive years.

Table 1. UNS Achievements in the Public Relations Award for Public University

Year	Category	Performance	Level
2017	Website	Second place	
	Publicity	First place	

Year	Category	Performance	Level
	Social Media	Second place	General-Public University
2018	Information Services via the Internet	Third place	General-Public University
	Media Relations	Third place	
	Social Media	Fourth place	
2019	Website	Best Champion 3	General-Public University
	Media Relations	Best Champion 2	
	Social Media	Best Champion 1	
2020	Press Conferences and Press Releases	Best Champion 3	Autonomous-Public University
	Social Media	First Champion	

Since its establishment as an Autonomous-Public University based on Government Regulation Number 56 of 2020 on October 6, 2020, followed up by the stipulation of Rector Regulation Number 64 of 2020 concerning Organization and Work Procedures of Elements Under the UNS Chancellor dated December 18, 2020, information and public relations services at UNS is under the management of the UPT of Public Relations and Media. It is an organizational structure supporting academic and non-academic services, especially in promotion and public relations services, media publications, and documentation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on the Rector's Regulation, the duties and functions of the UPT Public Relations and Media of UNS are limited to information service activities, internal and external relations implementation, and the development of information and public relations services. Meanwhile, planning and auditing public relations communication activities have not been facilitated.

It also happens in ten universities in Yogyakarta, where the role of public relations is mostly at the implementation or technical level, as communication facilitator and technician [1]. Public relations officer (PRO) activities at the ten universities focus more on publicity activities with the mass media (media relations), such as inviting press colleagues, writing press releases, holding press conferences, holding press tours and press gatherings; in addition to incidental activities such as promotions, compiling advertisements in public areas, and collaborating with national and international parties. The role of PRO is excluded at the managerial level, a strategic and ideal position for public relations—as a problem-solving facilitator.

To enter a managerial level position that automatically has direct access to agency leaders, public relations practitioners must equip themselves with knowledge and abilities in the management field to expand their functions not only limited to the technical level. In addition to managerial knowledge, public relations practitioners must also have the following supporting skills [2].

1. *Creator:* Having creativity in the creation of a brilliant idea, idea, or thought

2. *Conceptor:* Having the ability (skill) as a drafter in the preparation of public relations work programs and other program plans

3. *Mediator:* Having the ability to master communication techniques both through the media orally and in writing in delivering messages or distributing information from the institution to the public

4. *Problem solver:* Able to overcome every problem, both proactively, anticipatively, innovatively, dynamically, and selectively

The obstacles for public relations to play a role at the managerial level [3] lie in the structural problem, the absence of a mature infrastructure, in this case, in-depth knowledge of public relations, especially in carrying out its role as a manager [4]. Public relations practitioners' lack of adequate education and training is also an obstacle to increasing their professionalism. The development of internet technology in the era of information disclosure also requires public relations to continue to move quickly to follow it. Today's public relations must master social media such as websites, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok to make two-way interactive communication with stakeholders easier and faster. In particular, the effectiveness of higher education websites as information providers can be assessed from *transparency, interactivity, usability, website maturity, positivity, openness, access,* and *useful information*.

Unlike the functions and duties of public relations in commercial institutions, the role of public relations at UNS does not focus on efforts to increase the economic benefits of the institution but rather emphasizes the quality of public services. Differences in the role of public relations also appear between state universities and private universities. The intense competition between educational institutions caused the public

relations of Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana to think of promotional strategies to attract prospective new students, one of which was using direct marketing strategies [5].

When Institut Pertanian Bogor (IPB) was designated as PTNBH in 2013, its Public Relations Division moved to implement a public communication strategy to equalize perceptions related to its new status to reduce and provide solutions to the anxiety that arose in the IPB academic community, including students. It refers to the *relationship management* theory developed by John Ledingham and Steven Bruning [6], stating that public relations must play a role in balancing the interests of the organization with stakeholders, which can be achieved by managing the relationship between the organization and its stakeholders. In other words, institutions must build good relations with stakeholders through their public relations.

Generally, the functional relationship between an institution and its public relations is illustrated as follows [7].
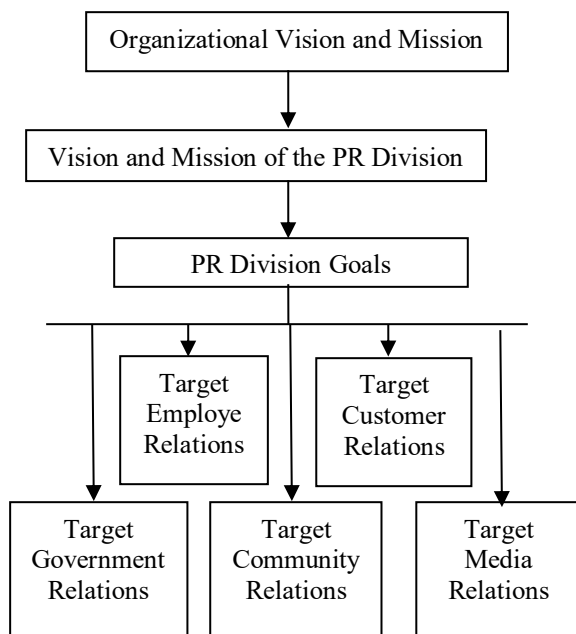

Figure 2. Functional Relations of Institutions with Public Relations

The chart demonstrates that whoever *is* the target of public relations services, all forms and activities of the services must still refer to the vision, mission and goals of public relations, which of course, are in line with the vision and mission of the organization. In other words, the organization's vision and mission are translated into the vision, mission and goals of public relations, which are then described and sorted into targets to be achieved by the work fields under it. The types of goals are not limited to the five examples in Chart 2 but can be adapted to the needs and scope of the organization.

One of the theories that public relations must understand is systems theory as it explains relationships, where the organization is seen as a container created from interrelated parts, which can adapt to changes in various fields, especially those related to the goals of the organization. Judging from this theory, UNS is an organization with clear boundaries, a structure and organizational goals officially established, both in the form of laws and other regulations. Organizational leaders must ensure that all team members work optimally to achieve the determined goals. The sustainability and success of the organization are determined by the resources owned, both in the form of assets, employees, clients, and services and products produced. This theory also states that organizations strongly depend on and attach to their internal and external environment. This environment is termed as stakeholders.

In systems theory, public relations refers to *boundary spanners*—those on the edge of the organization; thus, they have relationships with internal and external parties. Hence, public relations also functions as a communicator and mediator to convey information from organizational leaders to stakeholders and vice versa.

Meanwhile, according to situational theory [8], stakeholders are situational, meaning that when there are changes in situations, problems, constraints, opportunities, or issues in the organization, the public experiences changes. The public can be those who actively seek and process information about organizations or issues of interest to them, and they can also consist of a passive public. Problem recognition and level of involvement affect the public receiving and processing of information related to an issue.

This study intends to determine the extent of the role and constraints faced by the public relations of UNS in carrying out its functions, both at the technical and managerial levels. The research results are expected to enhance the function and service quality of the UNS public relations, especially at the planning stage.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The research utilized a qualitative method, aiming to provide an overview and understanding of how or why a communication reality occurs. Thus, the restrictions are only on cases and contexts, not certain variables. Therefore, the results of this study are interpretive and have subjective nuances.

The research employed a qualitative method with a scope of organizational communication, including organizational roles and responsibilities, organizational control, communication networks within the organization, organizational structure and function, and

organizational culture and climate.

This research belongs to the reality of rhetorical tradition communication [9], where communication is seen as a practical skill—delivering messages to convince or influence others. The focus of the knowledge learned in this tradition is how communicators develop certain strategies in conveying messages to the communicant (audience). The communicator's job is seen as strongly influenced by the skills of the communicator and the methods he uses.

This study deployed both primary and secondary data. Primary data are obtained from first-hand data sources in the field, while secondary data are collected from second data sources [10]. The data were gathered using literature review, documentation, and interviews. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with the informants, while secondary data were collected through a literature review from books, scientific journals, and the internet. Informants were determined using purposive sampling. The researchers selected informants with at least five years of experience as public relations officers. Interviews were conducted with three public relations staff of UNS.

The unit of analysis in this study came from the results of interviews and documentation. Data were analyzed qualitatively with Miles and Huberman's interactive model, where the stages involved data collection, data reduction, data presentation and conclusion [17]. Qualitative data were collected to strengthen and emphasize the data findings.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

UNS had seven public relations officers, of which three were pursuing the public relations profession of personal choice, while the other four became public relations officers due to the transfer of functions from echelon positions. In this study, researchers limit the scope of research to public relations officers that have served for more than 15 years.

Table 2. Research Informants

Code	Name	Work unit	Functional
P1	Tetri Wahyu Aryanti, S.S, M. I. Kom	Faculty of Economics and Business (FEB)	Young Public Relations Officer
P2	Maryani, S.Sos, M.I.Kom	Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (FISIP)	Young Public Relations Officer
P3	Suratno, S.Pd.	Faculty of Agriculture (FP)	Young Public Relations Officer

Of the three informants, P1 and P2 had educational backgrounds linear with public relations duties, Master of Communication Studies. Unfortunately, P3's educational background as a chemical education graduate was not closely related to the role of public relations. However, the three actively participated in activities to develop public relations competencies, including technical guidance, education and training, and workshops.

To improve my public relations competence, I usually attend training organized by the Ministry or workshops organized by agencies. However, at my current age, I find it difficult to keep up with the growing variety of media and public relations methods (P1).

I cannot make it myself for communication media that uses IT, for example, a video profile. FISIP is assisted by a team from the laboratory, usually by lecturers and students. I only help find and provide data that will be displayed in the profile video (P2).

I have attended professional and technical training several times. However, in anticipation of the rapid changes in information and communication technology, it is necessary to involve the millennial generation to manage content on various platforms, either internships or part-time (P3).

The statements submitted by the three informants indicate that the training related to competency development was still limited to improving skills in the technical field. Meanwhile, the role of public relations in an organization is not only limited to the technical field but can be divided into four categories.
1. Expert advisor (*expert prescriber*): Helping find solutions in solving relationship problems between agencies and the public
2. *Communication facilitator*: As a mediator to help the management hear what is expected by the public and be able to re-explain the policies and expectations of the organization to the public
3. *Problem-solving process facilitator*: Assisting the management as an advisor in taking decisions in overcoming problems or crises being faced rationally and professionally
4. *Communication technician*: Providing technical communication services

As a public relations officer for the FEB, I share information from the university to lecturers and employees, for example, related to the implementation of the morning ceremony or other activities coordinated by the UNS head office.

Unfortunately, sometimes I do not get the information right away from the authorities, while many questions have come from the faculty. My other jobs are covering and documenting the activities held by the faculty, making press releases, and uploading them to the media (P1).

Two students have assisted me in managing the website and social media of the FISIP. These media are used to report on faculty activities or events, information on policies or regulations, and student achievements. I have to relate actively and seek information on these matters from other departments, for example, the academic and student affairs (P2).

I carry out public relations tasks in the FP without any team involved. Because I am a functional official of a public relations institution, my position at the faculty is only as a public relations officer. However, in other units or faculties, public relations is only a side or an additional task, so they cannot focus on fulfilling their role as public relations officers. My job as a public relations officer for the FP is to convey information and document as well as publish activities (P3).

When viewed from the four Dozier categories [14], the role of UNS public relations officers remains limited as a communication technician and has not acted as a communication manager involved in program planning.

As a public relations officer for the FEB, I handle the emails, answer questions and respond to criticisms directed to the faculty by seeking answers from the authorities. For example, there were questions about the admission of international students. It happened many times. I did not know the procedure, so I forwarded the questions to the UNS International Office (P1).

If there are activities involving external parties, such as press conferences for seminars or the like, the tasks of the public relations officer of the FISIP are only to cover and publish the results. The public relations officer has never been assigned to be a spokesperson to convey information because there has been a person in charge of each activity. Likewise, when there has been a work accident in the faculty, the faculty leader is the one conveying information to external parties, such as media journalists (P2).

FP's public relations services target all stakeholders, including lecturers, students, alumni and the community. So, I must have the ability to communicate and build relationships well. In particular, I also always try to maintain good relationships with the media, both personally and institutionally (P3).

Public relations officers are tasked with maintaining good and harmonious relationships with all stakeholders—various parties being the target audience for their agency's activities, through a communication process. Stakeholders are internal and external parties playing a role in determining the success of the agency. Stakeholders involve various parties.
1. Internal stakeholders: leaders, staff and their families in their respective faculties
2. External stakeholders: students and their families, leaders and staff of other work units at UNS, alumni, agencies that collaborate with faculties, media, the community, and also the government

To maintain good relations with these stakeholders, the faculty's public relations function is still at the technical level, limited to sharing or publishing information obtained from leaders and other parties. Faculty public relations has not been involved in making decisions to plan activities and steps to maintain good relations with stakeholders. For example, in organizing *family day* or AMT activities with the target of all staff in the faculty and their families, public relations tasks are only limited to sharing information and documenting the activities. Meanwhile, initiation and planning are both conducted by the leaders. Ideally, when organizing a *family day event,* a public relations officer conveys accurate information related to the working atmosphere and condition of the agency. Staff often spends more time working in the office than doing activities with the family at home. Hence, families need to know and understand the working conditions of the staff because family support is essential in creating staff comfort at work.

Public relations is expected to create a safe and comfortable work climate for all employees. It needs to implement the *managing by walking around,* the strategy to identify problems and obstacles at the technical level early on and then forward them to the more competent party. The problem will not enlarge and extend beyond the agency if addressed early on. Unfortunately, the faculty's public relations does not yet have the authority to carry out this role. Public relations also does not have complete information regarding work procedures and leadership policies concerning employment status.

Public relations does not have the authority to plan service activities for and establish good relationships with external stakeholders, parties outside the agency's control, in press conferences, alumni gatherings, and CSR activities for the community around the campus. Its involvement is also limited to publishing plans and realization of activities through its media. It does not

have the authority to determine the stakeholders to serve and what service should be offered.

Stakeholders with the largest number and influence are students. Public relations must convey policies and procedures in the faculty to students and vice versa. Public relations must also be able to accommodate complaints and input from students and forward them to the competent authorities to obtain solutions. However, due to the limited number of public relations officers, only one person in each faculty, and limited access to information, information can be obtained and conveyed more quickly by student organizations such as BEM, DEMA or student associations. The information is usually about tuition fee relief procedures, scholarship applications, and applications for activity permits. So far, the faculty's public relations task is only reporting the activities or achievements of students. Public relations must be able to gain the trust of students to facilitate access to the required information.

Internal and external stakeholder satisfaction is one indicator of the success of UNS service quality. Public relations always need to maintain and develop this trust. The status of UNS as one of the state universities with legal entities in Indonesia, as well as its existence as the largest campus in Solo and its surroundings, has made its reputation relatively safe, and public opinion has also been good. One of the indicators is that the new student admissions ratio of UNS is getting tighter, from 1:15 in 2020 to 1:18 in 2021. The stability of the position of UNS has caused its public relations to feel no need for innovative services to maintain the university's reputation. From the internal side, the staff felt comfortable working at UNS, and it was not easy to have the desire to change places of work. Meanwhile, from the external side, no nearby universities could compete with the reputation of the UNS.

Those involved in planning and evaluating activities in the FEB are leaders, such as the dean, heads of departments, and staff with structurally equivalent positions. After a decision is made, then a public relations officer informs or implements it (P1).

Public relations is not directly involved in planning and conducting promotions to attract new students. It is more passive, simply providing the required data if requested (P2).

Not all stakeholders understand the importance of publication and reporting, even though the potential is large for improving the reputation of the faculty. As a result, public relations is often late or does not even know if there is an activity (P3).

In addition to having technical communication skills in carrying out their functions in organizational activities, a public relations practitioner must also have

managerial skills, one of which is the ability to make plans. Planning is an effort performed consciously and continuously and managed to choose the best alternative from the various alternatives available to achieve certain goals so that the organization is expected to be more productive, efficient, and effective in achieving its goals.

Several models can be used as a reference for public relations planning. However, this study utilized the simplest planning model by Cultip and Center [11], with the following steps.

1. *Fact-finding:* Researching to determine the public's opinions, attitudes, and reactions to events or agency policies

   Within faculty public relations, the fact-finding stage can be performed through social media or directly. Public relations can take advantage of the *Ask Me feature* on the official Instagram account managed by the faculty. Questions, suggestions, criticisms, and input obtained can be accommodated and managed to become a data compilation later.

   Public relations can also take the initiative to conduct surveys or questionnaires distributed to all stakeholders related to faculty services, for example, the procedure for applying for tuition fee waivers for students or withdrawing diploma legalization fees for alumni. In addition, fact-finding can also be carried out by faculty leaders, especially regarding applicable policies, regulations, and procedures.

   Fact-finding is also crucial when the faculty experiences a crisis or problem. For example, in the case of the detention of FISIP students while participating in a demonstration at the Surakarta DPRD Building, the public relations officer must actively seek information about actual events from primary sources.

2. Planning and decision-making (*planning-decision*): Based on the facts discovered, the public relations officer formulates attitudes, opinions, ideas, and reactions. This response is not based on the personal considerations of the public relations concerned but is an official decision of the agency that refers to the decision of the faculty leader.

   For example, a prospective FEB doctoral student reported unfriendly *help desk services* to the university. After collecting facts from related parties, comprising the report maker (prospective student), the report recipient (university), and the reported party (help desk officer), the public relations officer, together with the faculty leader, then planned the best settlement steps.

3. Communicating and implementing (*communication-action*): Decisions that have been agreed upon and the steps that will or have been implemented must be informed openly to all relevant stakeholders. Thus, the reputation of the institution is well maintained. Information can be conveyed directly, for example, through press conferences, alumni gatherings, discussions or talk shows between the faculty leader and student organization activists, or during *family gatherings*. In addition, information can also be

conveyed through official social media owned by the faculty.

4. Evaluation: A public relations officer assesses and evaluates the results and impact of the steps taken, including evaluating the effectiveness of management and planning techniques. The evaluation results become a reference for carrying out the stages in the next planning cycle. Planning is better carried out periodically: short term, every year; medium-term, every three years; and long term, every five years.

With the planning stage carried out by the faculty's public relations, who has entered the management level, it is hoped that the performance of the faculty will be more focused and able to handle problems effectively and efficiently in the event of a change or crisis.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, public relations officers of UNS should be involved in the planning stage, not solely as program implementers, to optimize their role in carrying out their functions both at the technical and managerial levels. It would enhance their service quality and improve the reputation of the university. The scope of this research is still narrow since it only involves three informants. To map the condition of UNS public relations, it is necessary to conduct further research involving all public relations practitioners in the university. Furthermore, research on this topic can be expanded by conducting interviews with other university public relations officers concerning their role in the planning stage.

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