



The Paradox of Disaster Risk Communication: Analyzing the Impact of Fear Mongering in Megathrust Earthquake Content on Public Risk Perception and Mitigation

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Abstract. The increasing tectonic risk in Indonesia, particularly from the Megathrust phenomenon, necessitates effective disaster risk communication. However, the proliferation of sensationalized "fear mongering" content in digital media presents a critical counter-challenge. This study investigates the phenomenological psychological impact of fear-mongering Megathrust earthquake content on public risk perception and preparedness behavior. Grounded in the Cultural Perception Risk Theory by Marsden, this research employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with six participants and systematic digital content observation. The findings reveal that fear mongering, driven by hyperbolic narratives and manipulated visuals, leads to a fractured public response. Religious beliefs (specifically fatalistic interpretations like *Qada Mubram*) and low digital literacy were identified as the main moderators, often resulting in apathy or excessive anxiety instead of rational mitigation. The study concludes that fear mongering compromises the primary goal of resilience by replacing rational alertness with confusion and resignation. It strongly recommends that government authorities (e.g., BMKG) implement proactive, evidence-based communication strategies and intensify efforts to integrate risk and digital literacy into public education to foster a rational and prepared society.

Keywords: Fear Mongering, Risk Information, Megathrust Earthquake, Risk Perception, Social Construction.

1 Introduction

Indonesia, positioned along the Pacific Ring of Fire, faces a critical and constant threat from seismic activity, with the potential Megathrust earthquake phenomenon representing a catastrophic risk. Effective disaster risk communication is therefore paramount for public preparedness and safety [4].

However, the widespread use of digital media has simultaneously fueled the proliferation of sensational and exaggerated content, often categorized as fear mongering. Fear mongering is a persuasive communication strategy that exploits genuine risk in-

formation by presenting it with hyperbole, dramatic visuals, and claims lacking scientific validation [11]. This practice creates a significant paradox: media that should be a source of factual risk information instead becomes a conduit for emotional manipulation, potentially undermining the public's capacity for rational mitigation [6]; [12].

This study, therefore, aims to analyze the social construction and phenomenological psychological impacts of fear-mongering content related to Megathrust earthquakes on the Indonesian public. By applying the Cultural Theory of Risk Perception by Eric [10], this research explores how individual perception of danger is not determined by scientific data, but rather by cultural biases and social structure that they believe in and uphold [10].

2 Methodology

This research employed a qualitative phenomenological approach within a constructivism paradigm to gain a deep understanding of the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of individuals exposed to fear-mongering content [1]; [3]. The primary data source was collected through in-depth interviews (IDI) with six participants, categorized based on their residential status: 1) those residing in non-earthquake-prone areas, and 2) those from or residing in earthquake-prone areas [2]. Secondary data involved systematic content observation of Megathrust-related content on various digital media platforms (e.g., social media and mass media), focusing on the identifiable elements of fear mongering, such as hyperbolic language, misleading visuals, and unsupported claims. Data credibility was ensured through Triangulation of Sources, cross-verifying participant interview accounts with the observed digital content and comparing findings against established scientific literature and official data from governmental agencies.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Fear Mongering Content Mechanism

The analysis revealed that digital content promoting fear systematically employed several strategies to sensationalize genuine risk:

1. **Hyperbolic Narration:** The use of emotionally charged and exaggerated diction (e.g., "Kiamat Besar!") and claims presented as definitive predictions (e.g., "BMKG Prediction: Megathrust Tomorrow!") [13].
2. **Visual Manipulation:** Repurposing old disaster footage or utilizing dramatic, unverified animations, designed to maximize emotional shock and not inform the public [7].

3.2 Psychological Response and Risk Perception

The content successfully elicited negative psychological responses, including anxiety, deep-seated fear, and helplessness. The internalization of the fear-mongering messages,

as described in the social construction theory, led to varied and often paradoxical risk perceptions.

Two significant cultural and psychological moderators were identified:

- 1 Religious Fatalism: Participants deeply held religious beliefs (e.g., Qada and Qadar in Islam) significantly influenced their response. While some demonstrated passive acceptance (Qada Mubram), viewing the disaster as an unchangeable fate and leading to passivity or apathy towards mitigation ("Manusia tidak boleh 'mendahului' kehendak Tuhan"), others maintained an active mitigation mindset (Qada Muallaq), viewing preparation as a necessary human effort in the face of fate ("Yang penting dengan itu kita bisa mencegah paling tidak"). This sometimes created tension between scientific warnings and religious interpretations.
- 2 Digital Literacy and Skepticism: Individuals with higher digital literacy exhibited greater skepticism toward unverified sensational content. They actively sought validation by cross-checking creator claims with official information from BMKG, resulting in a more rational and selective internalization process. Conversely, lower digital literacy correlated with greater vulnerability to panic [9].

3.3 Fear Mongering and Mitigation Failure

Fear mongering, despite its often-stated goal of raising awareness, frequently leads to failure in effective mitigation. The study noted a pattern of contradictory behavior where sharing frightening content for "awareness" was often met with apathy, social ridicule, or avoidance mechanisms in social circles, indicating a failure to establish a shared and rational risk understanding. The lack of credible, simple, and authoritative information from official sources allows sensational content to dominate public discourse and erode trust in genuine risk information.

4 Conclusion

This study concludes that fear mongering in Megathrust earthquake content acts as a significant barrier to effective disaster risk communication, ultimately creating a paradoxical scenario: the effort to raise awareness through fear often results in a maladaptive public response.

The analysis, grounded in the Cultural Theory of Risk Perception, proves that individual perception of danger is not determined by scientific data, but rather by cultural biases and social structure that they believe in in every participant. This fragmentation is primarily driven by two critical moderating factors: religious beliefs and digital literacy. The study found that while high digital literacy fosters skepticism and rational action, certain religious interpretations (i.e., Qada Mubram or passive fatalism) induce apathy and prevent rational mitigation efforts, regardless of the severity of the real risk.

Ultimately, fear mongering does not produce a state of rational alertness but rather an environment of confusion, excessive anxiety, or passive resignation. This phenomenon compromises the primary goal of disaster risk management, which is to build a resilient and prepared society (Hadiyat, 2019). The findings underscore the urgent need for authorities to reclaim the narrative space from sensational content creators.

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