



Protecting the Official or Protecting Public Trust? The Reputational Buffer Dilemma in Government Crisis Communication

Andhini Winariyanti

Faculty of Communication, Universitas Paramadina, Jakarta, Indonesia
Corresponding Author: andhini.winariyanti@students.paramadina.ac.id

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 2026-09-30 Accepted: 2026-10-03 Published: 2026-10-11	Government crisis communication becomes particularly complex when reputational threats originate from statements made by public officials rather than from institutional failures. This study examines how government communication institutions mediate such controversies and introduces the concept of the Reputational Buffer Dilemma. Using a qualitative comparative case-study design, the research analyzes three communication crises involving Indonesian central government actors between September 2025 and September 2026. Data were drawn from official statements, government documents, press releases, and media reports and analyzed through Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Image Repair Theory, and Bureaucratic Reputation Theory. The findings identify three mechanisms of institutional intervention: contextual buffering, institutional clarification, and semantic containment. These mechanisms demonstrate that the crisis source and the repair actor may be institutionally distinct, and that communication institutions can perform delegated image repair while simultaneously managing the reputational interests of officials, institutions, and public-facing trust orientations. The study extends crisis communication theory by conceptualizing institutional communication as a mechanism of reputational mediation and spillover management. It further emphasizes that trust-oriented communication should be distinguished from empirically demonstrated changes in public trust. The Reputational Buffer Dilemma is proposed as a mid-range framework for analyzing official-generated communication crises. Keywords: Bureaucratic reputation, Crisis communication, Government communication, Public trust, Reputational Buffer Dilemma

INTRODUCTION

The digitalization of the public sphere has altered both the velocity and the institutional ecology of government communication. Statements by public officials now circulate across press conferences, broadcast news, platform clips, social-media commentary, and user-generated reinterpretations before an official institution can stabilize their meaning. A short phrase can consequently become detached from its original setting, attached to competing frames, and evaluated by multiple audiences within hours. This acceleration does not make context irrelevant; rather, it turns context itself into an object of strategic contestation. Government communication institutions are increasingly required to decide whether to repeat, clarify, contextualize, correct, distance, or reframe an official statement, even as the reputational consequences are still unfolding.

This problem is particularly consequential in public institutions because government communication is tied to both democratic accountability and reputation management. Public organizations depend on multiple audiences whose expectations are not identical, including citizens, journalists, professional communities, civil-society organizations, political actors, and other government bodies (Boon et al., 2020; Carpenter & Krause, 2012). Communication in this environment, therefore, cannot be reduced to protecting an organizational brand. It also concerns the credibility of public authority, the intelligibility of policy communication, and the conditions under which citizens judge whether institutions are being accurate, transparent, and responsive. Recent research further indicates that strategic explanations, transparency, and the consistency of governmental communication can shape reputational judgments and trust-related evaluations (Al-Omoush et al., 2023; Gao & Wang, 2024; Lee, 2022; Zheng, 2023).

A distinctive difficulty arises when the source of reputational threat is a public official's own speech. A president, minister, or agency head communicates simultaneously as an individual speaker and as a symbolic representative of public authority. A controversial statement can therefore generate reputational exposure at several levels: the

personal credibility of the official, the reputation of the institution associated with the official, the legitimacy of the communication body responding to the controversy, and the standing of third parties implicated by the statement. The source of the controversial message and the institution responsible for managing its consequences may not be the same actor. This separation is analytically important because it creates a form of crisis communication in which responsibility for generating the problem and responsibility for communicating the response are institutionally distributed.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) remains a central framework for understanding how responsibility attribution, crisis history, and prior reputation shape reputational threat and response strategy (Coombs, 2007, 2022). Yet conventional applications often retain an organization-centered architecture in which the organization that bears the attributed responsibility also issues the response. Image Repair Theory similarly explains how an accused actor uses denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of offensiveness, corrective action, or mortification to address reputational threats (Benoit, 1995, 2015). In official-generated controversies, however, an institutional communicator may perform the explanatory or reparative work even when the initial official does not directly apologize, correct, or elaborate. This raises a theoretically significant question about the ownership of the repair message.

Bureaucratic Reputation Theory (BRT) provides a complementary perspective because it conceptualizes public-sector reputation as audience-dependent and embedded in networks of structurally related actors (Carpenter & Krause, 2012). Recent micro-level extensions emphasize multiple information sources, episodic audience interactions, and the possibility of reputation spillovers between related units (Willems et al., 2025). Experimental work on spillover crises likewise shows that reputational harm can extend beyond the actor directly implicated in a crisis and that differentiation strategies can shape the attribution of responsibility (Hua et al., 2026). What remains underdeveloped is the communication mechanism by which a public institution attempts to manage such spillover when the triggering actor is a senior official who is also part of the institution's symbolic identity.

The present article addresses this theoretical space through the concept of the Reputational Buffer Dilemma. The concept refers to a condition in which a government communication institution operates as a reputational intermediary between an official whose statement has generated controversy and audiences evaluating both the official and the wider institution. The term *buffer* does not imply unconditional defense. Buffering can involve contextualization, factual correction, boundary clarification, semantic narrowing, acknowledgment of criticism, or reaffirmation of institutional principles. The dilemma arises because these communicative moves can protect different reputational objects simultaneously, yet may also generate tension among official-protective narratives, institutional credibility, and trust-oriented expectations.

The empirical setting is Indonesian central-government communication between September 2025 and September 2026, a period that followed the establishment of the Government Communication Agency (Badan Komunikasi Pemerintah, Bakom) under Presidential Regulation No. 96 of 2025. The regulation describes Bakom as a nonstructural body tasked with orchestrating communication and information concerning strategic government policies and programs (Republik Indonesia, 2025). Three cases were selected because each involved an identifiable official statement, subsequent public or stakeholder contestation, and an institutional response: the July 2026 controversy over the expression "*londo ireng*," the May 2026 dispute regarding Bakom's relationship with new-media actors, and the September 2026 clarification concerning the term "*post-truth experts*." These cases do not represent all government crises; rather, they constitute theoretically relevant episodes in which the separation between crisis source and repair actor is observable.

The study asks: How do government communication institutions mediate reputational threats arising from public officials' statements, and what message-level mechanisms characterize this mediation? It makes four linked contributions. First, it separates the crisis source, repair actor, reputational object, and audience rather than treating them as a single organizational unit. Second, it develops the concept of delegated image repair to describe repair conducted by an institutional communicator other than the actor who generated the controversy. Third, it identifies contextual buffering, institutional clarification, and semantic containment as message-level mechanisms for managing reputational spillover. Fourth, it distinguishes trust-oriented communication from demonstrated changes in public trust, thereby limiting claims to what documentary data can validly support. Together, these contributions reposition government crisis communication as a process of reputational mediation rather than a simple sequence of organizational threat and response.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Government crisis communication as a multi-audience problem

Crisis communication concerns the strategic production and dissemination of messages intended to reduce uncertainty, address stakeholder expectations, and manage reputational or relational consequences during disruptive events. In the public sector, these functions operate within an accountability environment that differs from commercial settings. Citizens are not merely customers, and government communication is evaluated in relation to public authority, institutional competence, procedural fairness, transparency, and democratic responsibility. Public organizations also face heterogeneous audiences whose assessments may be based on different reputational

dimensions and information sources (Boon et al., 2020; Carpenter & Krause, 2012).

This multi-audience structure becomes especially salient in digital communication environments. Government use of social media can support transparency, participation, and collaboration, but contradictory messages across government and social media environments can reduce trust (Al-Omouh et al., 2023). Experimental evidence from public-sector crises further suggests that explanations can reduce reputational losses relative to silence (Lee, 2022), while concern-oriented and management-oriented strategies can have different effects on emotions and local-government trust depending on crisis type (Gao & Wang, 2024). Transparency is also not a single communicative act. In a police crisis context, accountability, information substantiality, and participation were found to operate as analytically distinct transparency strategies with implications for anger and trust (Zheng, 2023).

These findings establish two points that are central to the present study. First, institutional communication can shape how audiences evaluate a public organization after a crisis. Second, the effects of such communication remain audience-dependent rather than being inherent properties of the message itself. The latter point is particularly important for documentary studies: the presence of language of transparency, responsiveness, or accountability can be coded as a trust-oriented communication practice, but claims about actual trust restoration require direct evidence from audiences.

SCCT and the separation of the crisis source from the response actor

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides a systematic framework for explaining how crisis type, attribution of responsibility, crisis history, and prior organizational reputation interact to determine the magnitude of reputational threat and the selection of response strategies (Coombs, 2007, 2022). Its analytical value lies in clarifying how an episode becomes reputationally consequential and how communication can be matched to perceived responsibility. Within public-sector settings, this approach is increasingly relevant because organizations operate under heightened expectations of accountability and legitimacy. Lee (2022), for example, demonstrates that strategically constructed explanations can influence citizens' judgments of public organizations following crises. Gao and Wang (2024) similarly show that governmental crisis-response strategies can generate different emotional and trust-related effects across crisis types.

For official-generated controversies, however, the conventional SCCT sequence requires refinement. SCCT frequently operationalizes the organization bearing reputational responsibility as the actor formulating the crisis response. In controversies generated by a public official's speech, those functions may be institutionally disaggregated. A president, minister, or agency head may constitute the immediate source of the controversial statement, while a ministry, spokesperson, or specialized communication body provides the subsequent explanation, contextualization, or correction. Crisis responsibility and communication responsibility, therefore, cannot automatically be collapsed into a single actor.

The analytical sequence proposed here consequently expands SCCT from crisis source → responsibility attribution → response strategy → audience reaction to crisis source → responsibility attribution → institutional mediation → response strategy → reputational orientation → audience interpretation. Institutional mediation is the crucial addition. It draws attention to who is authorized to reinterpret the triggering statement, which reputational object is being prioritized, and what new meanings are introduced between the initial communication and the audience's subsequent evaluation.

Image Repair Theory and Delegated Repair

Image Repair Theory (IRT) explains how actors respond when they are held responsible for an offensive act or when their reputation is threatened. Benoit (1995, 2015) identifies five broad families of strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. The framework has been applied to individuals, corporations, and public organizations. Recent public-sector research shows that government organizations use combinations of image-repair strategies across official and social media communication, with reducing offensiveness and corrective action playing prominent roles (Kamboh et al., 2024). Studies of Indonesian officials have likewise shown that erroneous statements can trigger multiple forms of image restoration rather than a single uniform response (Susilo et al., 2022).

The present study focuses on a less developed feature of image repair: the possibility that the actor performing repair is not the actor who produced the reputation-threatening statement. In institutional settings, spokespersons and communication agencies can reinterpret intent, correct relational claims, define the scope of a statement, or reaffirm institutional norms without requiring the initial speaker to personally issue the repair. This study refers to this process as delegated image repair. Delegation here does not imply a formal delegation order; it denotes the empirical separation between the originator of the contested message and the communicator performing the reparative function.

Delegated repair is theoretically consequential because source identity can affect how a response is interpreted. A clarification issued by the original speaker may be read as personal accountability, whereas the same clarification delivered by an institution can be understood as organizational boundary management, reputational protection, or an attempt to stabilize the meaning of the original statement. The concept, therefore, extends IRT from a strategy-

centered question, what repair strategy is used?, to an actor-architecture question, who performs the repair, for whose reputation, and with what institutional authority?

Bureaucratic reputation, spillover, and institutional mediation

Bureaucratic Reputation Theory conceptualizes the reputation of public organizations as a set of audience beliefs about organizational capacities, intentions, history, and mission (Carpenter & Krause, 2012). Reputation is consequently relational rather than purely organizational. Public agencies strategically address audiences because favorable reputational beliefs can support autonomy, legitimacy, and discretion. The multi-audience perspective developed by Boon et al. (2020) further demonstrates that public service organizations vary in which audiences they prioritize in reputation management.

Recent theoretical development moves BRT toward the micro-foundations of reputation formation. Willems et al. (2025) emphasize that reputational beliefs arise from distinct information sources, episodic interactions, and social-network processes, and they explicitly theorize reputation spillovers between structurally related units. Empirical work outside the public sector similarly documents that reputational damage can migrate across associated actors, while recent SCCT-based experiments show that differentiation can mitigate spillover responsibility (Hua et al., 2026). These insights are highly relevant to public officials and institutions because audiences may treat a senior official's speech as evidence about the institution represented by that official.

What BRT does not yet specify in detail is the message-level mechanism by which a communication institution attempts to interrupt, redirect, or contain such spillover. The present study addresses this gap by treating institutional clarification as a reputational mediation mechanism. The communication body can add context, redefine the institutional status of a relationship, narrow the target category of a contested statement, or foreground norms such as media independence and openness to criticism. These interventions do not automatically eliminate spillover; they are attempts to shape the informational environment through which spillover is interpreted.

Public trust as an orientation rather than an inferred outcome

Public trust is commonly associated with judgments of competence, integrity, openness, and reliability. In crisis contexts, trust may function both as an antecedent to cooperation and as an outcome shaped by governmental behavior and communication. Cross-national research on governmental crisis communication identifies officials, institutional performance, openness, and the handling of uncertainty as reasons citizens cite for trust and distrust (Gierth et al., 2026). Experimental and survey-based studies likewise show that government response strategies, transparency, and communication consistency can influence trust-related outcomes (Al-Omouh et al., 2023; Gao & Wang, 2024; Zheng, 2023).

The present design, however, does not directly measure citizens' perceptions. Public trust is therefore not treated as a dependent variable. Instead, the analysis identifies trust-oriented communication: message features that invoke accuracy, openness, accountability, responsiveness, acknowledgment of legitimate criticism, or institutional independence. This conceptual discipline prevents a common inference problem in documentary crisis research, whereby an institutional statement expressing transparency is treated as evidence that trust has been restored. Whether audiences regard such a message as credible, defensive, evasive, or trustworthy remains an empirical question requiring reception data.

Framework

The Reputational Buffer Dilemma describes a form of government crisis communication in which the source of reputational threat and the actor issuing the reputational response are institutionally distinct but symbolically connected. The communication institution stands between the initial official statement and multiple audiences, introducing an additional interpretive layer that can modify the perceived meaning, scope, institutional status, or accountability implications of the original communication.

The framework distinguishes four analytical units. The crisis source is the official statement that initiates the controversy. The repair actor is the institutional communicator who issues the subsequent response. Reputational objects are the persons, institutions, professions, or relationships whose standing may be affected by the episode. Audiences are the groups that receive and evaluate both the original statement and the institutional response. Distinguishing these units prevents analytical slippage between who caused the controversy, who responds to it, and whose reputation is actually being managed.

Buffering is conceptualized as message-level mediation rather than insulation from criticism. Three mechanisms are expected: contextual buffering, which inserts wider speech or policy context around a disputed expression; institutional clarification, which defines the organizational status, authority, or boundaries of a disputed relationship; and semantic containment, which narrows an interpretation that has expanded beyond the target claimed by the response actor. Each mechanism can carry more than one reputational orientation simultaneously.

Theoretical propositions

- Proposition 1 — Role separation:** When a public official generates a communication crisis but an institutional communication body issues the response, the crisis source and repair actor should be analyzed as distinct units.
- Proposition 2 — Delegated repair:** Institutional communicators can perform image repair without the initial official directly apologizing, correcting, or explaining the statement.
- Proposition 3 — Multi-object buffering:** A single institutional response can simultaneously protect the official, protect institutional credibility, and signal trust-oriented principles.
- Proposition 4 — Spillover management:** Institutional clarification functions as a message-level mechanism for managing reputational spillover between structurally related officials and public institutions.
- Proposition 5 — Audience contingency:** The reputational meaning and effects of a buffering strategy remain contingent on audience interpretation and cannot be inferred from the institutional message alone.

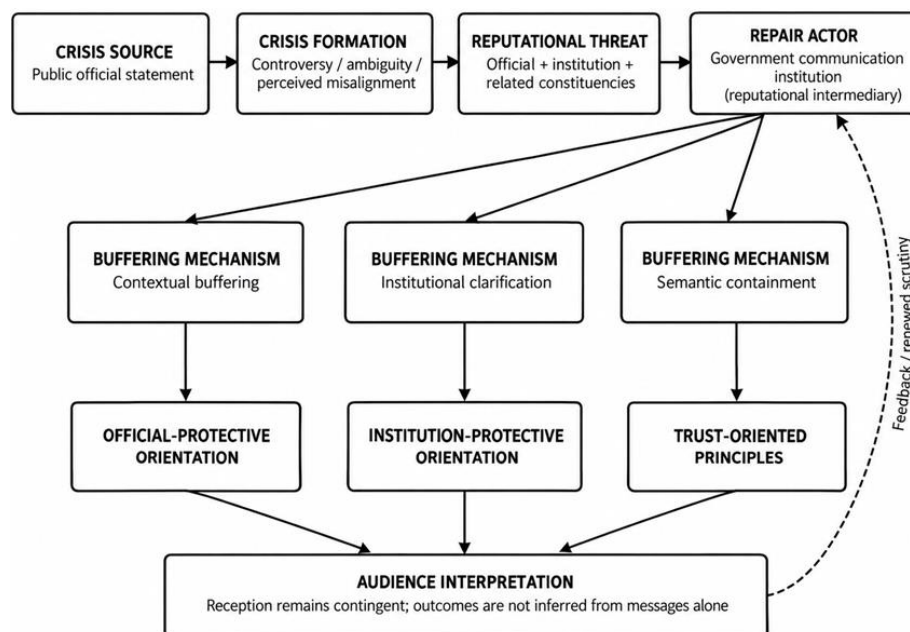


Figure 1. Reputational Buffer Dilemma model.

Figure 1 presents the framework as a relational rather than purely linear process. Institutional communication intervenes after controversy and reputational threat have formed, but audience interpretation can produce renewed scrutiny of the repair actor itself. The dashed feedback relation, therefore, represents a central feature of the dilemma: a response designed to reduce reputational exposure may also make the communication institution a new object of evaluation.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and analytical purpose

The study uses a qualitative comparative case-study design oriented toward theory development. The purpose is not to estimate the prevalence or effectiveness of government crisis-response strategies. Instead, the design reconstructs bounded communication episodes and compares how institutional actors intervene when an official statement becomes the source of reputational contestation. A comparative design is appropriate because the proposed concept concerns a mechanism of reputational mediation that may appear through different forms across cases while retaining a common actor architecture. The cases are treated as communication episodes rather than evaluations of political actors or policy performance. The analysis focuses on observable statements, institutional responses, documented stakeholder contestation, and their relationships. It does not infer motives that are not expressed in the documents, nor does it treat media reporting as a direct measure of public opinion.

Research context and case boundaries

The temporal boundary is September 2025 to September 2026. The starting point corresponds to Presidential Regulation No. 96 of 2025, enacted on 17 September 2025, which established the Government Communication Agency (Bakom) and replaced the previous Presidential Communication Office arrangement (Republik Indonesia,

2025). This institutional change provides a relevant context for examining the increasingly coordinated role of government communication in managing strategic public information. Cases were selected purposively using six criteria: (1) an identifiable statement by a central-government official initiated or materially contributed to the controversy; (2) the statement generated publicly documented disagreement, criticism, or ambiguity; (3) an institutional communicator subsequently issued a clarification, contextualization, or correction; (4) the response was publicly accessible; (5) at least one independent or non-originating media source documented the controversy; and (6) the episode fell within the research period. Three cases met these criteria and provided variation in the type of ambiguity being managed: a contested political expression, an ambiguous institutional relationship, and an expanded interpretation of a statement's target.

Table 1. Case selection and analytical variation

Case	Period	Crisis source	Institutional repair actor	Primary ambiguity/risk
"Londo ireng"	July 2026	President Prabowo Subianto	Kemkomdigi / government communication response	Meaning and implications of a contested expression; press relations
New-media partnership	May 2026	Bakom Head Muhammad Qodari	Bakom Deputy for Media Partnerships and Relations	Institutional status of "partner"; media independence
"Post-truth experts"	September 2026	President Prabowo Subianto	Ministry of Human Rights	Scope of target category; interpretation of "experts"

Source: Author's compilation from the documentary corpus (2026).

Documentary corpus and source hierarchy

The study uses documentary evidence from three source categories: (a) official government regulations, press releases, and institutional clarifications; (b) direct or reported statements by the officials involved; and (c) contemporaneous media reports used to reconstruct chronology and identify competing interpretations. Official documents are treated as primary evidence of what an institution communicated, not as independent verification that the institution's interpretation was factually correct. Media reports are used to document the existence and content of contestation, and, where available, outlets with different institutional affiliations are compared.

The source hierarchy follows the analytical question. When identifying the wording or declared position of an institution, official sources are prioritized. When identifying whether a statement generated contestation, independent news reports, and stakeholder statements are prioritized. Where an outlet reproduces a government press release, it is treated as a source of transmission rather than as independent corroboration. This distinction is important because the study analyzes reputational framing while avoiding the assumption that institutional self-description is neutral evidence.

Core documentary materials include Presidential Regulation No. 96 of 2025; Kemkomdigi's July 2026 contextualization of the "londo ireng" statement; contemporaneous reporting by The Jakarta Post on the original statement and press-union criticism; Bakom's May 2026 clarification of its relationship with the Indonesia New Media Forum as reported by Bloomberg Technoz and Liputan6; contemporaneous stakeholder denials reported by IDN Times and Bloomberg Technoz; and the Ministry of Human Rights' September 2026 clarification of the "post-truth experts" statement. Background documents on government crisis-communication coordination are used only to establish institutional context.

Unit of analysis and coding procedure

The unit of analysis is the dated communicative act: a discrete statement, clarification, press release, or reported utterance that performs a recognizable function within the episode. Treating the communicative act, rather than the entire document, as the unit makes it possible for a single source to contain several analytically distinct functions, for example, contextualizing the official's intent while also affirming openness to criticism. Analysis proceeded in five stages. First, each case was reconstructed chronologically to establish the triggering statement, the documented contestation, and the institutional response. Second, relevant excerpts were open-coded for their manifest communicative function.

Third, open codes were mapped to theory-informed categories derived from SCCT and Image Repair Theory: responsibility attribution, denial, clarification, contextualization, reframing, justification, correction, apology/mortification, institutional distancing, defense of the official, acknowledgment of criticism, and public-interest or trust-oriented language. Fourth, each excerpt was coded for reputational orientation: official-protective, institution-protective, trust-oriented, or multi-orientation. Fifth, cross-case comparison identified recurring mechanisms and examined whether the same mechanism served different reputational objects across cases.

Coding decisions were rule-based. Contextualization was coded when a response added surrounding speech, purpose, or situational context to alter the interpretation of the triggering statement. Definitional or institutional clarification was coded when a response specified the formal status, authority, or organizational meaning of a

relationship or term. Semantic containment was coded when the response narrowed the category of persons, institutions, or meanings to which the original statement was said to apply. Trust-oriented language was coded only when the response explicitly invoked principles such as openness, accuracy, accountability, responsiveness, media independence, or legitimate criticism. It was not used as evidence that public trust had actually changed.

Analytical transparency and credibility

To increase analytical transparency, the study maintains a case-by-case coding matrix linking each coded excerpt to its source, date, open code, theoretical category, reputational orientation, and cross-case mechanism. The matrix serves as an audit trail, allowing interpretations to be traced back to specific communicative acts. A 20% subsample of the coded material was independently reviewed by a second member of the research team. Disagreements were discussed, and category definitions were refined where necessary. Because the analysis is interpretive and concept-building, this procedure was used to strengthen consistency and reflexive scrutiny rather than to claim statistical inter-coder reliability. The comparative logic is analytic rather than representative. A mechanism was considered cross-case when it appeared in at least two cases at the level of actor architecture or reputational function, even if its linguistic realization differed. Case-specific mechanisms were retained when they explained distinctive forms of ambiguity. Negative evidence was also considered: the absence of a direct apology in Cases 1 and 3, for example, is analytically relevant to the delegated-repair proposition but is not interpreted as evidence of how audiences evaluated the response.

Table 2. Illustrative coding sequence

Case	Paraphrased communicative act	Open code	Mechanism/category	Reputational orientation
1	The public is asked to interpret the President's remarks in their full context; the term is described as a political metaphor rather than an attack on a profession.	Reframing intent through context	Contextual buffering; reducing offensiveness	Official-protective + trust-oriented
1	The response affirms openness to criticism and describes reporting on damaged schools as useful input.	Reaffirming the legitimacy of criticism	Trust-oriented language	Trust-oriented
2	Bakom states that no contract or formal cooperation exists with the named media actors and explains the meeting as an audience/dialogue.	Narrowing "partner" to a communication relationship	Institutional clarification; correction	Institution-protective
2	Bakom emphasizes the independence of new and conventional media.	Boundary affirmation	Institutional distancing; trust-oriented language	Institution-protective + trust-oriented
3	The Ministry states that the criticism concerned "post-truth experts," not experts or academics generally.	Narrowing the target category	Semantic containment; contextualization	Official-protective + third-party reputational protection

Source: Author's coding matrix (2026).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview and Presentation of Research Results

Case 1: The "londo ireng" controversy – contextual buffering

On 23 July 2026, President Prabowo Subianto used the expression "londo ireng" during a political speech while discussing Indonesians he described as serving foreign interests. Contemporary reporting documented references to journalists, reporters, analysts, and NGOs in this portion of the speech (The Jakarta Post, 2026a). The expression subsequently became the focus of criticism from journalist organizations. The Jakarta Post reported that several press groups demanded an apology and characterized the labeling as denigrating to the journalistic profession (The Jakarta Post, 2026b). For the purposes of this analysis, these reports establish that the speech was publicly contested; they are not treated as a population-level measure of public opinion. The institutional response did not take the form of a direct presidential apology in the materials analyzed. Instead, Kemkomdigi's Director General of Public and Media Communication, Fifi Aleyda Yahya, asked the public to view the statement in its full context. The response described the phrase as a political metaphor that was not intended to target a profession, media organization, or specific group, while also emphasizing that criticism and reporting on public problems could provide useful input for government improvement (ANTARA, 2026a).

The first mechanism is therefore contextual buffering. The response does not dispute that the expression was used; it attempts to alter the interpretive frame surrounding it. The communicative sequence is: contested expression → public/professional criticism → institutional contextualization → reinterpretation of intent → reaffirmation of

openness to criticism. In Image Repair terms, the move resembles reducing offensiveness and reframing more than mortification. In the extended SCCT sequence, the critical feature is that the crisis source and repair actor are different: the original statement came from the President, whereas the explanatory work was performed by an institutional communication actor. The response also illustrates multi-object buffering. One layer protects the official by emphasizing the intended meaning and broader context. A second layer protects institutional credibility by affirming respect for criticism and press freedom. These orientations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they address different reputational objects. The case, therefore, supports the role-separation and delegated-repair propositions while also showing why trust-oriented language should be distinguished from trust outcomes. The documents demonstrate that openness was asserted; they do not establish that journalists or citizens found the explanation persuasive.

Case 2: The new-media partnership controversy – institutional clarification

A different form of ambiguity emerged in May 2026. In a public briefing, Bakom Head Muhammad Qodari referred to the Indonesia New Media Forum and described new-media actors as communication partners in the digital information ecosystem (ANTARA, 2026b; Suara.com, 2026). Several media organizations and digital accounts subsequently disputed the way their relationship or inclusion had been characterized. Reports by IDN Times and Bloomberg Technoz documented statements from organizations denying that they had joined the forum, been recruited by Bakom, or entered into a government partnership (Bloomberg Technoz, 2026a; IDN Times, 2026). Bakom's subsequent clarification, delivered by its acting Deputy for Media Partnerships and Relations, Kurnia Ramadhana, shifted the issue from the broad term "partner" to the relationship's formal status. The clarification stated that the meeting with the forum was an audience or dialogue, that no contract or formal cooperation existed with the named media organizations, and that Bakom respected the independence of both new and conventional media (Bloomberg Technoz, 2026b; Liputan6, 2026).

The principal mechanism in this case is institutional clarification. Unlike Case 1, the central dispute was not primarily the emotional or symbolic meaning of a political expression. It concerned what kind of institutional relationship audiences could reasonably infer from the label "partner." The response, therefore, performs boundary work by differentiating communicative access from formal cooperation, contractual association, or editorial alignment. The repair actor is also the institution whose own leader produced the original statement, making the case an example of intra-institutional role separation rather than inter-institutional delegation. The reputational object also shifts. The clarification protects Bakom's institutional credibility by narrowing the meaning of the relationship, while the affirmation of media independence addresses reputational concerns affecting third-party media actors. This provides especially clear evidence for spillover management: the controversy generated reputational exposure not only for Bakom but also for organizations whose independence could be called into question if "partnership" were interpreted as formal or editorial alignment. Institutional clarification attempts to contain that spillover by redefining the relationship at the level of the message.

Case 3: The "post-truth experts" clarification – semantic containment

The third case occurred in September 2026 and concerned the interpretation of President Prabowo Subianto's reference to "post-truth experts." On 23 September 2026, the Ministry of Human Rights published a clarification by Minister Natalius Pigai stating that the President's criticism was not directed at experts or scholars in general, but at a category described as "post-truth experts" (Kementerian Hak Asasi Manusia Republik Indonesia, 2026). The institutional intervention narrows the target category attributed to the original statement. The relevant sequence is: presidential statement → broader interpretation of the target → institutional clarification by another ministry → specification of a narrower intended category. The communicative problem is therefore one of category expansion: an interpretation of the statement could extend reputational implications to a wider professional or epistemic community than the response actor claims was intended.

This case is best described as semantic containment. Like contextual buffering, it seeks to modify audience interpretation without denying that the original statement occurred. Unlike Case 1, however, the main operation is not to add a broader speech context but to draw a semantic boundary around the category being criticized. The repair is delegated because the explanatory intervention is issued by the Minister of Human Rights rather than by the President. At the same time, the response has more than one reputational object: it protects the President from an interpretation that the criticism applies to all experts while also attempting to protect the broader expert community from being positioned as the target of the statement. Again, the documentary evidence cannot establish reception. The Ministry's clarification demonstrates an institutional attempt to narrow meaning; whether audiences accepted that boundary remains outside the evidentiary scope of this study. This limitation directly supports the audience-contingency proposition.

Across the three cases, the communication institution does more than distribute information. It reconstructs institutional meaning. The initial statement becomes one of several sources of information, and the subsequent clarification attempts to modify the interpretive environment in which audiences evaluate the episode. This pattern is consistent with the BRT proposition that reputational beliefs are formed through multiple information sources and episodic interactions (Willems et al., 2025).

Analysis of Findings

Table 3. Cross-case mechanisms and reputational architecture

Dimension	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Shared implication	Repair the actor relation	Primary proposition
Initial problem	Contested expression	Ambiguous institutional relationship	Expanded target category	Meaning becomes reputationally consequential	Inter-institutional / delegated; intra-institutional; inter-institutional / delegated	P1
Buffering mechanism	Contextual buffering	Institutional clarification	Semantic containment	The institution adds an interpretive layer	Different actor from source in Cases 1 & 3; different institutional role in Case 2	P2
Main reputational object	Official + press/government credibility	Bakom + media independence	Official + expert community	More than one reputation can be implicated	Multi-object	P3
Spillover problem	Official statement to institution/press relations	Institutional label to third-party media	Official criticism to broader expert category	Clarification attempts to limit reputational transfer	Message-level boundary management	P4
Audience evidence	No direct measurement	No direct measurement	No direct measurement	Message orientation ≠ reception outcome	Reception remains open	P5

Source: Author's cross-case analysis (2026).

The cases also demonstrate that buffering should not be equated with simple defense. Contextual buffering primarily operates on the interpretation of intent; institutional clarification operates on the formal or organizational meaning of a relationship; semantic containment operates on the scope of a target category. Each mechanism can serve defensive, corrective, or trust-oriented functions, sometimes simultaneously. The common feature is mediation: an institution introduces a new interpretive layer between the original message and its audiences. Finally, reputational objects can shift during the episode. A controversy that begins with an individual official can become an institutional credibility problem once a communication body intervenes. Conversely, a clarification aimed at protecting institutional credibility can also affect third parties, as in the media-independence issue in Case 2. The repair actor is therefore not external to reputational risk. Intervening can make it a new object of scrutiny. This recursive property is central to the Reputational Buffer Dilemma.

Discussion

From crisis response to reputational mediation

The central theoretical implication of the findings is that official-generated controversies require a shift from an organization-centered model of crisis response to an actor-relational model of reputational mediation. Conventional crisis analysis asks what an organization should say when it faces a reputational threat. The cases examined here introduce a different architecture: the person generating the threat may simultaneously symbolize the institution, while another organizational actor performs the response. The analytically relevant question, therefore, becomes not only which strategy is used, but who is authorized to repair which reputation on whose behalf.

This distinction extends SCCT without displacing its core logic of responsibility attribution and reputational threat. The added institutional-mediation stage explains how a response can be generated by an actor that did not originate the contested statement. It also creates a place in the model to examine how the response reallocates attention among reputational objects. In Case 1, contextualization shifts attention from the literal expression toward claimed intent and democratic openness. In Case 2, definitional clarification shifts attention from a broad partnership label to a narrower institutional relationship. In Case 3, semantic containment shifts attention from a generalized professional category to a specified subcategory. These are not simply alternative word choices; they are mechanisms for reorganizing the relationship between responsibility, meaning, and reputation.

Delegated image repair and the ownership of repair messages

The second contribution is the concept of delegated image repair. Image Repair Theory has traditionally focused on the strategies used by an accused or threatened actor (Benoit, 1995, 2015). Public institutions complicate this assumption because spokespersons, ministries, or specialized communication agencies can perform the reparative work for statements made by senior officials. The present cases show that repair can therefore be organizationally distributed. Delegated repair matters because the identity of the repair actor can change the communicative meaning of the response. A personal apology by an official is an act of individual accountability. A clarification by a communication institution can instead foreground institutional interpretation, boundaries, or norms.

The two may use similar rhetorical resources while carrying different accountability implications. Kamboh et al. (2024) demonstrate the relevance of image-repair strategies in public organizations; the present study adds that the locus of repair itself should be treated as an analytical variable. Delegation also creates a potential legitimacy problem. An intermediary may possess institutional authority to clarify policy or official intent, but audiences may question whether it can credibly speak for the original communicator. This issue cannot be resolved from documentary data alone. It generates a testable hypothesis for the future: repair-actor congruence may moderate the perceived accountability and credibility of otherwise identical response strategies.

Multi-object buffering and reputation spillover management

The third contribution concerns reputation spillover. BRT emphasizes that reputations are formed among multiple audiences and can spill across structurally related units (Willems et al., 2025). Hua et al. (2026) similarly demonstrate that spillover crises can affect organizations beyond the directly implicated actor and that differentiation can alter the attribution of responsibility. The present study specifies a communication mechanism for this process in government settings: institutions use message-level boundary work to regulate how closely the official, the institution, and implicated third parties are symbolically connected. Contextual buffering manages spillover by distinguishing a contested expression from the broader institutional stance attributed to it. Institutional clarification manages spillover by distinguishing an informal communicative relationship from a formal organizational relationship. Semantic containment manages spillover by distinguishing a narrower intended category from a broader category that the statement may implicate. These mechanisms do not guarantee reputational protection; they describe how public institutions attempt to prevent an interpretive association from expanding unchecked. The cases also show why a single response should not be coded as serving only one reputational object. Institutional crisis messages are multifunctional. A statement can protect an official's intent, defend institutional credibility, acknowledge criticism, and affirm a norm such as media independence within the same communicative act. This multi-orientation property is empirically evident in the coding and conceptually important because it explains why crisis responses can appear simultaneously defensive and public-interest-oriented.

Trust-oriented communication and the limits of documentary inference

A fourth contribution is methodological. Research has established that governmental communication strategies can affect trust, emotions, and reputational evaluations (Al-Omouh et al., 2023; Gao & Wang, 2024; Gierth et al., 2026; Zheng, 2023). Documentary analysis, however, focuses on the message side of this relationship rather than on audience outcomes. The present framework, therefore, separates trust-oriented communication from demonstrated trust effects. This distinction improves construct validity. When an institution states that it welcomes criticism, respects media independence, or seeks accuracy, these elements can be coded as trust-oriented principles because they signal openness, accountability, or responsiveness. It would be analytically unwarranted to conclude from the statement alone that public trust increased. Audience-side evidence surveys, experiments, interviews, focus groups, comment analysis, or longitudinal perception data are required for that claim. The audience-contingency proposition, therefore, functions both as a theoretical statement and as a boundary condition on interpretation.

Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

This study makes four closely related theoretical contributions. First, it introduces a role architecture that distinguishes the crisis source, repair actor, reputational object, and audience, refining crisis-response models that implicitly treat these functions as belonging to a single organizational actor. Second, it develops the concept of delegated image repair to conceptualize reputational repair performed by an institutional communicator other than the actor who generated the controversy. Third, it specifies contextual buffering, institutional clarification, and semantic containment as message-level mechanisms for managing reputation spillover. Fourth, it distinguishes trust-oriented communication from demonstrated trust outcomes, strengthening construct validity in documentary crisis research. Together, these contributions show that a single institutional response may simultaneously carry official-protective, institution-protective, third-party-protective, and trust-oriented functions.

For practitioners, the model suggests that the first task in an officially generated controversy is to map the episode's reputational architecture rather than immediately selecting a defense strategy. Communication teams should identify who generated the trigger, which institution has legitimate authority to respond, which stakeholder relationships are exposed to reputational spillover, and whether the central problem concerns intent, factual accuracy, institutional boundaries, category scope, or accountability. Response mechanisms should then correspond to the nature of the ambiguity. Contextualization is most relevant when interpretation depends materially on the surrounding speech or

policy context. Institutional clarification is appropriate when the dispute concerns the status of a relationship, authority, or formal organizational boundary. Semantic containment is relevant when a statement is interpreted as targeting a broader category than the response actor claims it was intended to. In each case, trust-oriented elements such as accuracy, openness, responsiveness, and acknowledgment of legitimate concern should be assessed separately from reputational defense. The framework also cautions against assuming that an intermediary response will be accepted simply because it is institutionally authoritative. If the repair actor is perceived as protecting the official rather than clarifying the public record, delegated repair may itself become a source of reputational scrutiny. Government communication practice, therefore, requires attention not only to message content but also to source legitimacy, evidentiary support, and the relationship between the responding institution and the original speaker.

Limitations and Future Research

The study has four principal limitations. First, evidentiary independence is incomplete because several primary documents were produced by the institutions whose communication is being analyzed. These sources are appropriate for studying institutional framing, but cannot independently verify every underlying factual claim. The use of contemporaneous media and stakeholder reports partially addresses this limitation by documenting contestation and chronology. Future research should incorporate full speech transcripts, platform archives, civil-society monitoring, and systematic source-comparison protocols. Second, the empirical scope is intentionally narrow: three episodes within one national context and a one-year period. The design supports concept development and analytical comparison rather than statistical generalization. Cross-national studies are needed to examine whether role separation and delegated repair operate similarly across presidential, parliamentary, federal, and decentralized systems, as well as across administrative cultures with different norms of spokesperson authority.

Third, the study examines short-term public-facing communication rather than durable reputational consequences. Reputation spillover may develop over months or years. Longitudinal designs could determine whether contextualization, institutional clarification, or semantic containment produces only temporary narrative redirection or is associated with lasting changes in judgments of officials and institutions. Fourth, audience reception is not directly measured. The analysis identifies reputational orientations and trust-oriented language but cannot establish whether citizens, journalists, experts, or other stakeholders perceived the responses as credible, transparent, defensive, or evasive. Surveys and experiments could compare identical strategies delivered by the original official versus an intermediary institution. Focus groups and interviews could examine how audiences attribute authority to repair actors, while computational reception analysis could test whether institutional clarification changes the semantic associations surrounding a controversy over time.

Future research should therefore examine repair-actor congruence, the relative effectiveness of the three buffering mechanisms, the conditions under which institutional autonomy strengthens or weakens delegated repair, and the role of media systems and political polarization in reputation spillover. The Reputational Buffer Dilemma is best treated at this stage as an empirically grounded, context-bounded mid-range framework that is open to falsification and refinement.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how government communication institutions respond when a public official's statement becomes the source of a reputational crisis. Across three Indonesian central-government episodes, institutional responses did not merely repeat the original message. They intervened in its meaning by adding context, clarifying institutional boundaries, or narrowing the category to which the statement was said to apply. These interventions are captured by three mechanisms: contextual buffering, institutional clarification, and semantic containment. The findings support the Reputational Buffer Dilemma as a framework for situations in which the crisis source and repair actor are distinct but structurally connected. The framework advances crisis communication research by separating responsibility for generating the controversy from responsibility for communicating the repair. It extends Image Repair Theory by introducing delegated image repair and develops Bureaucratic Reputation Theory by specifying message-level mechanisms by which institutions attempt to manage reputational spillover. It also shows that crisis responses can be multi-orientational: a single message may simultaneously protect an official, defend institutional credibility, protect an implicated third party, and signal trust-oriented principles.

The framework does not claim that institutional buffering is inherently effective, legitimate, or trust-enhancing. Its analytical purpose is to identify how reputational mediation is organized and what communicative mechanisms are used. Audience interpretation remains decisive. A clarification can be intended as transparency and still be received as a defense; contextualization can be intended as an explanation and still be rejected as an evasion. This is why documentary evidence should identify communicative orientation without presuming audience outcomes. The broader implication is that government crisis communication cannot always be understood as an organization responding to its own crisis. In officially generated controversies, the response may be produced by an intermediary institution that must simultaneously negotiate the meaning of the original statement, the official's reputation, the institution's credibility, the standing of implicated third parties, and the public expectation of accountable communication. The Reputational Buffer Dilemma provides a conceptual vocabulary for examining that layered responsibility and a basis for comparative research on who performs reputational repair, for whom, and with what

consequences.

ETHICAL DECLARATION

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