Sosioedukasi
JURNAL ILMIAH ILMU PENDIDIKAN DAN SOSIAL
ISSN: 2086-6135 E-ISSN: 2541-612x
Volume 15 No. 4 Desember 2026 https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index

MEDIA RELATIONS STRATEGIES OF WEST JAVA DISKOMINFO IN MAINTAINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH MASS MEDIA AMID COMMUNICATION BUDGET CONSTRAINTS

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ARTICLE HISTORY
Received : 19-08-2026
Revised : 26-08-2026
Accepted : **20-10-2026**

KEYWORDS
Adaptive Communication Strategy; Budget Constraints; Government Communication; Local Relationship Management Theory; Media Relations;

ABSTRACT

This study examines how the West Java Communication and Information Office (Diskominfo) adapted its media relations strategies to sustain relationships with mass media after the 2025 budget efficiency policy cut its media budget by approximately 94 percent. Using a qualitative single case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with three key informants at Diskominfo West Java and analysed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, with source triangulation and member checking for validity. Nine adaptive strategies were identified and mapped onto Iriantara's three media relations processes: managing relations, through re-engineering paid partnerships, transparent communication with editorial leaders, and open access to spokespersons; developing strategy, through maximising owned and earned media, strict internal KPIs, and WhatsApp-based coordination; and developing networks, through the Editor-in-Chief Forum, IKP Talks, engagement with journalists' professional organisations, and the 'Diskominfo Babarengan' motto. Read against Grunig and Hunt's model typology, these strategies suggest that, under budget pressure, Diskominfo's practices moved in a direction more consistent with the Two-way Symmetric ideal than during periods of budgetary abundance; this reading is offered cautiously, as an interpretation of the case rather than a generalisable causal claim. The study contributes to the still-limited literature on government public relations under conditions of fiscal constraint, and suggests that media relationships anchored in trust and shared values may be more resilient to budget fluctuations than those built primarily on financial transactions.

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INTRODUCTION

In a democratic governance system, mass media is not merely a channel for information distribution but a strategic partner performing verification, clarification, and social oversight of public policy. Habermas (1989) contends that mass media occupies a central position in the public sphere as a medium enabling rational discourse between the state and society, so that the relationship between government institutions and mass media is fundamentally functional rather than purely transactional.

At the local government level, responsibility for managing this relationship is formally mandated to the Communication and Information Office (Diskominfo). Regulation of the Minister of Communication and Information Technology No. 4 of 2024 (Regulation of the Minister of Communication and Informatics Number 4 of 2024 concerning the Implementation of Concurrent Government Affairs in the Sector of Communication and Informatics, 2024) stipulates media relations as one of ten functions under the sub-affairs of Public Information and Communication that local governments must perform, operationalised through a paid dissemination budget (Article 17) and an operational budget for media relations activities such as press conferences and editorial meetings (Article 22).

Presidential Instruction No. 1 of 2025 on APBN and APBD Efficiency compelled all local governments to undertake comprehensive budget cuts. West Java Provincial Government reallocated IDR 5.4 trillion toward infrastructure development, and Diskominfo West Java's media budget was reduced from IDR 50 billion to IDR 3 billion per year—a 94 percent reduction affecting both the paid dissemination budget and the operational budget for media relations activities (Presidential Instruction No. 1 of 2025 concerning Expenditure Efficiency in the Implementation of the State Budget and Regional Budgets for Fiscal Year 2025, 2025).

Preliminary data illustrate the scale of this impact: advertising and advertorial partnerships between Diskominfo West Java and a major West Java print outlet declined from IDR 405,405,360 in 2023 to IDR 125,675,672 in 2025 (a 70.3 percent decrease), while a West Java online outlet's placement frequency dropped from five placements worth IDR 150 million in 2023 to a single placement worth IDR 30 million in 2025. Diskominfo's own media monitoring data recorded negatively-toned coverage of the Provincial Government rising from 13.2 percent in 2024 to 28.9 percent in 2025. Diskominfo was consequently caught between two imperatives: compliance with the governor's efficiency policy, and its statutory obligation under Permenkominfo No. 4/2024 to maintain relationships with media institutions that had themselves lost a significant source of revenue.

A review of the literature indicates that existing research on government public relations media relations in Indonesia has predominantly examined normal operating conditions (Annisa, 2022; Rohmana & Pratiwi, 2020) or post-crisis scenarios triggered by external events such as corruption cases (Awal et al., 2024) and negative media coverage (Nurdiansyah & Kartika, 2020). What distinguishes the present study is that the source of pressure is neither routine operation nor an external reputational crisis, but the institution's own internal budget policy. By drawing on three informants spanning the policy, managerial, and operational levels of a single case, and by reading the resulting strategies against both (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) model typology and (Hon & Grunig, 1999) Relationship Management Theory, this study offers a resource-scarcity perspective that has not previously been examined in the Indonesian government public relations literature, and asks: how did Diskominfo West Java adapt its media relations strategies to maintain relationships with mass media amid communication budget constraints following the 2025 reallocation?

Media relations is a component of public relations practice aimed at building and sustaining mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and media institutions. (Iriantara & Soenendar, 2005) identifies three interrelated processes through which it is practised: managing relations, developing strategy, and developing networks. (Jefkins, 1992) adds six underlying principles, of which cultivating genuine personal relationships is the only one independent of budgetary availability, and therefore the one most able to endure under conditions of severe resource constraint. In the local government context, Canel and Sanders (2016), as cited in (Tabayuni et al., 2026) note that government communication carries a legally mandated transparency obligation beyond institutional reputation management, consistent with the operational-budget provisions of Permenkominfo No. 4/2024 Article 22.

(Grunig & Hunt, 1984) classify public relations practice into four models based on communication directionality and balance of interest: *press agentry* (one-directional, propaganda-oriented), *public information* (one-directional, accuracy-

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Volume 15 No. 4 September 2026 https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index

oriented), *two-way asymmetric* (bidirectional but oriented toward organisational interest), and *two-way symmetric* (balanced, bidirectional, oriented toward mutual understanding). This study uses the two-way symmetric model as a normative benchmark against which to read whether Diskominfo's strategies under constraint moved toward more dialogic, equitable communication or regressed toward one-directional patterns.

Relationship Management Theory (Hon & Grunig, 1999), building on (Ferguson, 2018) relational paradigm and (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998) working definition of the organisation–public relationship, distinguishes relationship maintenance strategies, access, positiveness, openness, assurance, networking, and sharing of tasks, as process, from relationship quality, trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality, as outcome. In this study, (Iriantara & Soenendar, 2005) three processes provide the structural framework for analysis, (Hon & Grunig, 1999) six maintenance strategies serve as the analytical lens applied at each process level, and, given the qualitative design, the four quality dimensions are operationalised through exploratory interview questions rather than scaled instruments, consistent with (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) guidance on adapting quantitative constructs to qualitative inquiry.

METHOD

This study adopts a constructivist paradigm with a qualitative approach and single case study design, selected because the reality under investigation, how Diskominfo construes and enacts its media relations function under constraint, is differently constructed by each actor involved rather than singular or objective. The case study method was chosen for its capacity to elucidate a contemporary, unique, and complex phenomenon without manipulating the behaviour under investigation (Mulyana et al., 2024; Yin, 2017).

The unit of analysis is the Communication and Information Office of West Java Province, bounded institutionally (Diskominfo West Java as primary subject), by event (the 2025 media expenditure reallocation policy), and temporally (April 2025 through early 2026). Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with three key informants selected through purposive sampling: Adi Komar, Head of Diskominfo West Java, as the strategic decision-maker; Nidar Nadrotan Naim Sujana, Head of the Public Information and Communication Division, as the managerial-level implementer; and Andri Bukhori Poerana, Mid-level Public Relations Functionary for media handling, as the operational-level practitioner. Interviews were conducted between January and February 2026 at Diskominfo West Java, averaging 60 to 90 minutes per informant.

Because all three informants are drawn from within a single institution, the sample is necessarily small; data sufficiency was therefore assessed through deliberate cross-level triangulation rather than sample size alone. The three informants represent distinct organisational levels, policy, managerial, and operational, so that each successive interview was examined for whether it introduced strategies or interpretations not already accounted for at the other two levels. Data collection was considered adequate once the policy-, managerial-, and operational-level accounts converged on the same nine practices without new categories emerging, and once member checking with the informants confirmed no further strategy had been omitted.

Data were analysed using (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Sugiyono, 2019) interactive model, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Concretely, interview transcripts were first open-coded line by line to label discrete actions and justifications given by informants (e.g., "shortened contract duration", "invited editors for direct dialogue", "opened spokesperson access"). Related codes were then grouped into axial categories describing the function each action served (preserving partnerships, communicating transparently, substituting cost with access, and so on), and these categories were finally mapped onto (Iriantara & Soenendar, 2005) three media relations processes, managing relations, developing strategy, and developing networks, which yielded the nine strategies reported in the findings. This coding sequence was cross-checked against the raw transcripts by re-reading each quotation against its assigned category to confirm fit.

Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, comparing statements across the three informants, and member checking, whereby preliminary findings were returned to informants for accuracy confirmation. The researcher acknowledges that her professional background as a journalist may influence data interpretation; this potential bias was managed through rigorous triangulation, strict separation of researcher and journalist roles during data collection, and sustained reflexivity throughout the analytical process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

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RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study identified nine media relations strategies employed by Diskominfo West Java to maintain relationships with mass media amid budget constraints. These strategies emerged organically as adaptive responses rather than from pre-structured planning, and can be mapped onto (Iriantara & Soenendar, 2005) three media relations processes, reflecting a shift in emphasis from paid to relational modalities (summarised in Table 1).

Table 1. Mapping of Diskominfo West Java's Media Relations Strategies Post-2025 Budget Reallocation

Media Relations Process	Strategies Implemented	Concrete Instruments
Managing Relations (assurance, openness, access)	1. Re-engineering of paid partnerships 2. Transparent communication with editorial leaders 3. Unrestricted access to spokespersons	Duration shortened, partnership preserved; editors invited for direct dialogue; doorstop and interviews opened without financial conditions
Developing Strategy (trust, positiveness)	4. Maximising owned & earned media 5. Strict KPI implementation (24 hours) 6. WhatsApp groups as primary channel	Humas Jabar social media, YouTube, Jabarprov website; press releases circulated within 24 hours; press-release and agenda groups active daily
Developing Networks (networking, sharing of tasks)	7. Editor-in-Chief Forum and IKP Talks 8. Engagement with journalists' professional organisations 9. 'Diskominfo Babarengan' motto	Semi-formal dialogue at minimal cost; PWI Competency Test support, IKP Talks across regions; shared vision as a non-financial relational foundation

Source: Research Findings, 2026

First Process: Managing Relations

Re-Engineering of Paid Partnerships

The most immediate step taken by Diskominfo West Java was not the outright termination of paid partnerships but a structural re-engineering of their arrangements, preserving institutional cooperation while substantially reducing its scale.

> *"We undertook a re-engineering of partnerships. For example, budget allocations that previously covered 12 months were restructured to cover only 2 months, but we ensured that the partnership itself remained in place, even if the media expenditure provided to the media company was considerably reduced."*

This reflects an effort to preserve institutional commitment, a relationship quality dimension in Relationship Management Theory, and corresponds to the assurance strategy in Hon and Grunig's (1999) framework: the organisation demonstrates continued commitment to the relationship despite reduced scale.

Transparent Communication with Editorial Leaders

When partnership values had to be reduced, Diskominfo elected a direct and transparent communication approach with editorial leaders, affording media institutions a contextual explanation rather than a formal notification.

> *"We would definitely invite the relevant media colleagues to our office and communicate the situation verbally and transparently. We provided an understanding of two conditions: the decline in regional revenues and the priority of fulfilling basic service development for the people of West Java."*

This transparency is a concrete manifestation of the openness strategy within Hon and Grunig's (1999) framework; honest communication about constraints tends to preserve trust despite reduced financial satisfaction, consistent with Nurdiansyah and Kartika's (2020) finding that honesty in information provision is a determinant of long-term media relations success.

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Unrestricted Access to Official Spokespersons

Among the most innovative strategies was compensating for reduced paid expenditure by providing unrestricted, financially unconditioned access to government spokespersons.

"We opened access to spokespersons as widely as possible for the media. Government spokespersons range from Regional Heads and the Secretary of Regional Government to all structures beneath them. We facilitate media whenever there is an interview request, whether in a doorstop format or any other arrangement, all of it we have opened. In fact, many media colleagues now call me directly."

In Jefkins's (2004) terms, this is the most fundamental form of media service, giving journalists what they genuinely need. Within the two-way symmetric benchmark, open access enables a more authentic bidirectional information flow than relationships dominated by paid transactions.

Second Process: Developing Strategy

Maximising Owned and Earned Media

With paid media capacity sharply reduced, Diskominfo shifted focus toward owned media (self-managed platforms) and earned media (coverage obtained organically through news value).

"We must be self-reliant and innovative in maximising the earned media and owned media we currently have. The human resources at Diskominfo, particularly within the Public Information and Communication Division, must all perform public relations functions. Every personnel member must be capable of serving as an information source within their respective work environment."

Owned media was maximised through increased content intensity across Humas Jabar's social media accounts, the Jabarprov website, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, a pattern consistent with Graham and Avery's (2013) observation that resource-constrained local government communicators increasingly substitute paid placement with directly managed digital channels.

Implementation of Strict KPIs as a Substitute for Financial Control

As financial-instrument control diminished, Diskominfo replaced it with more structured internal performance standards.

"The media handling team in the field works until 14:00, and within a maximum of one hour, they must have transmitted audio recordings, spokesperson videos, and primary data to the press release team. The press release team then prepares the news release within a maximum of two hours. Thus, within 24 hours, the press release output must have been circulated."

These KPIs serve a dual function: ensuring consistent quality of information service to media, and signalling that budget reduction does not entail a reduction in institutional commitment. This is a concrete manifestation of the reliability dimension of trust, most acutely felt when budget can no longer serve as the primary relational instrument.

WhatsApp Groups as a Cost-Free Communication Channel

WhatsApp groups became the most intensively utilised substitute for formal, face-to-face engagements that incur costs.

"Quite frequently. Especially with the ease of internet communication today, platforms such as WhatsApp are used very extensively. There are even dedicated WhatsApp groups open between us and our media colleagues. The press release and agenda groups have been running for years."

All members of the media handling team provide journalists with direct personal contact, enabling informal communication beyond working hours. These groups reflect the access dimension within Hon and Grunig's (1999) framework: organisations that are easily reachable build stronger trust than those accessible only through formal procedures.

Third Process: Developing Networks

Editor-in-Chief Forum and IKP Talks as Low-Cost Relational Activities

The Editor-in-Chief Forum and IKP Talks were cited as the most effective activities at minimal cost.

"The Editor-in-Chief Forum is a semi-formal gathering for sharing information and soliciting input regarding development and coverage in West Java. As for IKP Talks, the speaker honorarium is below one million rupiah, yet

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its audience encompasses all public relations and government communications practitioners across West Java, all 27 regencies and cities."

Both activities fulfil the networking dimension in Hon and Grunig's (1999) framework, building a relational ecosystem beyond bilateral ties with individual outlets. The Editor-in-Chief Forum in particular enables direct dialogue between Diskominfo leadership and editorial leaders without a commercial agenda, the most concrete manifestation of control mutuality identified in this study.

Engagement with Journalists' Professional Organisations

Diskominfo developed non-financial support for the wider media ecosystem through active involvement with journalists' professional organisations, including AJI, PWI, and IJTI.

"We involve those organisations in our activities. For example, in IKP Talks, we engage them as speakers. When PWI organises a Journalist Competency Test or leadership elections, we facilitate and support them. Institutionally, we provide our full support."

This reflects the sharing-of-tasks dimension in Hon and Grunig's (1999) framework: Diskominfo and journalists' organisations collaborate toward shared objectives, cultivating social capital whose long-term value extends beyond advertorial placement.

The *'Diskominfo Babarengan'* Motto: A Value-Based Strategy

Above the technical strategies, the Head of Diskominfo articulated an overarching, philosophically framed strategy serving as an umbrella for the entire approach.

"Our strategy aligns with our motto: 'Diskominfo Babarengan'. This means there needs to be a shared understanding that the government, media, and the people of West Java share equal responsibility for development and social problem-solving. So the strategy is togetherness and synergy. Concretely, we will invite media representatives to sit at the same table with relevant agencies across sectors, to exchange ideas for problem-solving without the rigidity of formal meetings."

'Diskominfo Babarengan', meaning 'together' in Sundanese, represents an effort to build a relational foundation beyond the transactional-financial dimension, toward one grounded in shared values and collective responsibility, an expression of the mutual understanding at the core of the two-way symmetric ideal.

Theoretical Paradox: Budget Constraints and More Symmetric Communication

A notable finding of this study is an apparent paradox. Under conditions of budgetary abundance, Diskominfo's media relationships tended to be transactional: media received advertorials and public service announcements while Diskominfo received assured publicity, a pattern that, in Grunig and Hunt's (1984) taxonomy, more closely resembles the two-way asymmetric model. When the budget was cut by 94 percent and transactional instruments were no longer available, the remaining strategies, informants report, shifted closer to the two-way symmetric ideal: direct dialogue without commercial agendas in the Editor-in-Chief Forum, transparent communication about budget conditions, unconditioned spokesperson access, and the 'Diskominfo Babarengan' motto positioning media as partners in shared responsibility.

The mechanism informants describe is that once financial shortcuts were no longer available, Diskominfo relied instead on trust, honesty, openness, and relational sincerity as its remaining relational capital. Within Hon and Grunig's (1999) framework, this reflects a shift toward non-financial relationship maintenance strategies, openness, assurance, networking, and sharing of tasks, consistent with Nurdiansyah and Kartika's (2020) finding that honesty and personal relationships are more durable success factors than financial support.

Not all nine strategies, however, appear to carry equal weight in this shift. Strategies that create direct, unmediated contact, unrestricted spokesperson access and the Editor-in-Chief Forum, most plausibly correspond to control mutuality and mutual understanding, since they change who can initiate contact and on what terms. Strategies such as the 24-hour KPI regime and WhatsApp coordination, by contrast, primarily reinforce reliability and accessibility; they make the existing relationship function more efficiently rather than restructuring its terms. Read this way, the shift toward the two-way symmetric ideal is more precisely located in the relational and network strategies than in the operational ones, a distinction the findings do not allow to be tested statistically but that qualifies how far the paradox should be generalised across all nine strategies.

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This reading is also consistent with, and extends, findings from beyond the Indonesian case. Lee, Neeley, and Stewart (2011) observe that government communicators facing resource constraints tend to fall back on relational rather than financial tools precisely because relational tools are the ones still within their control; Graham and Avery (2013) similarly document local governments substituting paid placement with owned and earned channels as budgets tighten. Within the same institution, Wiwitan et al. (2025) find that Diskominfo West Java's media-monitoring practice already draws on dialogic public relations principles, mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment, which offers independent, non-interview corroboration that a more dialogic orientation was emerging in this organisation around the same period, not solely as an artefact of how the present informants chose to describe their own strategies.

That corroboration notwithstanding, the present study's account of improved relationship quality still rests entirely on Diskominfo's own description of its practices. Because all three informants are government officials evaluating their own institution's strategies, the finding that budget constraints improved relationship quality is Diskominfo's own reading of the relationship, and it cannot, on this evidence alone, be taken as confirmation of what journalists and editorial leaders actually experienced. The possibility that the same reduced budget and reduced formal engagement (media gatherings and out-of-city coverage facilitation were both curtailed) is experienced by media partners as a loss of institutional support rather than a gain in relational authenticity cannot be ruled out, and is treated here as an open, empirically testable question rather than as a settled outcome.

This paradox gains further significance in light of the fact that not only the paid dissemination budget but also the operational budget for media relations activities, media gatherings and out-of-city coverage facilitation among them, was reduced. Media gatherings had been discontinued for several years, and the Editor-in-Chief Forum, last convened in 2024, had not yet been rescheduled at the time of data collection. These formal interaction spaces leave a void not entirely fillable through WhatsApp communication; the personal relationships built over many years serve as the primary buffer against this structural gap, but without renewed formal engagement, that social capital risks eroding over time.

CONCLUSION

The study's principal conceptual contribution to suggests that non-financial maintenance strategies, openness, assurance, networking, and sharing of tasks, can substitute for financial instruments in sustaining trust and commitment when the latter become unavailable, and that this substitution is most visible in strategies that restructure direct contact rather than in those that merely make existing routines more efficient. This offers a resource-scarcity contingency to a literature on government public relations that has so far been framed mainly around normal operations or externally triggered reputational crises.

Practically, the findings suggest that local government communication institutions would benefit from a media relations portfolio not wholly dependent on paid dissemination, one that allocates operational budget for non-paid activities such as media gatherings and editorial meetings, and that cultivates social capital through dialogue forums and support for journalists' professional organisations, alongside consistent, transparent communication.

This study is limited by its exclusive reliance on internal Diskominfo perspectives; the perspective of mass media as the recipient of these strategies is addressed separately in the parent thesis. Because the claimed improvement in relationship quality is, on the present evidence, Diskominfo's own account, two lines of future research follow directly from this limitation: first, incorporating the perspectives of editorial leaders, field journalists, and journalists' organisations, to test whether the paradox identified here is experienced by media partners as a genuine improvement in relationship quality or as a loss of institutional support; and second, a comparative study across two or more provincial Diskominfo offices with different budget baselines, to test whether the shift toward more symmetric communication observed here is a general effect of fiscal constraint or specific to this case.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The researchers express gratitude to Head of Diskominfo West Java Adi Komar, Head of the Public Information and Communication Division Nidar Nadrotan Naim Sujana, and Mid-level Public Relations Functionary Andri Bukhori

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JURNAL ILMIAH ILMU PENDIDIKAN DAN SOSIAL
ISSN: 2086-6135 E-ISSN: 2541-612x
Volume 15 No. 4 September 2026 https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index

Poerana for their willingness and openness in providing information throughout the study. Appreciation is also extended to the thesis supervisors and examiners of the Master's Program in Communication Science, Universitas Padjadjaran, Dr. Pandan Yudhapramesti, S.Sos., M.T., Dr. Rully Khairul Anwar, M.Si., Dr. Diah Fatma Sjoraida, M.Si., Dr. M. Ilham Gemiharto, M.Si., and Dr. Toto Sugito, M.Si. for their invaluable guidance and constructive input.

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT in order to improve the language and readability of the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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