



Spin Doctoring as Democratic Betrayal: The Ethical Collapse of Government Public Relations in Hybrid Democracy

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ABSTRACT

Government public relations has historically relied on a propaganda model of top-down, asymmetric communication. Digital and social media technology now expose policy failures to public scrutiny before institutions can respond, and government communication strategies have not kept pace with that shift. Research on government public relations has focused mostly on strategies, tactics, and message design, while its ethical dimensions in policy decision-making remain underexplored. We examine the conditions under which GPR practitioners can move from a one-way asymmetric model toward two-way symmetric communication, positioning GPR as a devil's advocate within the policy process to counter groupthink and prevent decisions that disregard public interest. Drawing on a qualitative case study design that combines framing analysis and document analysis, we identify a pattern we call spin doctoring by default. Institutions fall back on reactive, inconsistent communication when a crisis arises because a devil's advocate was never involved in high-impact policy processes, as occurred in the case examined here. This pattern betrays the profession's obligation to the public and the democratic accountability that legitimate government communication depends on. We offer a structural account of GPR ethics under hybrid democracy and a model for repositioning GPR from a propaganda-oriented to a two-way symmetric, devil's-advocate function.

INTRODUCTION

Government public relations (GPR) practitioners face structural pressure to communicate whatever policy their institutional client has decided, regardless of how critically the public receives it. Loyalty to the client can become an obligation that justifies almost any communicative strategy. An ethical alternative exists: GPR can treat the public, not only the client, as a constituency it must serve. It can raise objections before a policy is finalised, rather than defend it uncritically once it is announced. Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program illustrates the cost of the first model, and the absence of the second.

Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program became the site of a significant government communication failure in 2026, when a procurement of 21,801 electric motorcycles, worth approximately Rp 1 trillion, by Badan Gizi Nasional (BGN), the National Nutrition Agency, escalated from a reputational controversy into a criminal investigation within two months (Adriansyah, 2026; Saputra & Nugroho, 2026). The procurement first became public in April 2026, when images of the motorcycles stored in a warehouse circulated on social media, prompting widespread criticism that the agency had no institutional spokesperson prepared to address (Saputra & Nugroho, 2026). By June 2026, the Attorney General's Office had named five suspects, including BGN's former director, on charges of procurement fraud and systematic price mark-up (Adriansyah, 2026), and a subsequent government audit found that budget waste under the implicated leadership had reached Rp 10.5 trillion per year (AlFarisi & Ramadhan, 2026). Over the following months, BGN cycled through three directors in under two years, with the second resigning after just 45 days in office (Wiryono, 2026).

This vulnerability is not incidental to social media; it is symptomatic of a longer-standing pattern in government public relations. Historically, GPR in many contexts, Indonesia included, has operated on a one-way, top-down, and asymmetric communication model: government speaks, and the public is expected to listen, absorb, and comply (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This model was survivable, if not ethically defensible, in an era when institutions largely controlled the channels through which citizens received information, and a negative narrative could be managed through consistent messaging and a controlled news cycle.

However, digital and social media technology has removed the conditions that made this model viable. A policy failure today does not travel through a small number of controllable channels; it travels through millions of individual accounts simultaneously, each capable of adding commentary, evidence, and amplification before an institution can formulate any response at all. Crisis management approaches built for an era of message control and narrative neutralisation, denial, downplaying, waiting for the news cycle to move on, no longer function as they once did.

Poor government performance now translates almost immediately into reputational and legitimacy damage, and by extension into a direct cost to political popularity. Indonesia's own trajectory in 2026 illustrates the scale of this cost: presidential approval fell from 81.2 percent in November 2025 to 51.1

percent in July 2026, a decline survey researchers linked to worsening public perceptions of the economy, politics, and law enforcement, conditions to which the fiscal pressure documented later in the case analysis is one contributing factor (Wicaksana & Aliansyah, 2026). The reverse also holds: governments willing to listen and respond visibly to public criticism, rather than attempting to neutralise it, are better positioned to survive the compressed, high-visibility news cycle that digital communication has produced. The BGN case examined in this article illustrates a government still operating on the older model in an environment that no longer tolerates it.

This sequence is not simply a story about poor crisis management. It is a case study in what happens when government public relations is structurally absent from the policy-making process, and what follows when an institution has no capacity for honest communication about its own decisions. It is also a case study in professional ethics: in what obligations GPR practitioners carry toward institutions that employ them, and toward the public those institutions are mandated to serve. It is, further, a case study in the structural conditions of hybrid democracy, where weak horizontal accountability and a dominant executive narrative make this kind of communicative vacuum not an aberration but a structurally probable outcome.

The scholarly literature on government public relations and crisis communication provides useful frameworks for understanding this case. Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory offers a rigorous way to classify crises and assess the appropriateness of institutional responses (Coombs, 2019). The model of two-way symmetric communication articulated by Grunig and Hunt (1984) establishes the normative ideal of public relations as a function that balances institutional and public interests. Hallahan et al. (2007) define strategic communication as a discipline that actively shapes policy environments rather than merely reporting on them. And the literature on spin doctoring, from Moloney (2006) to Gaber (2000) and McNair (2007), documents the ethical tensions that arise when professional communicators prioritise institutional self-protection over honest public information. Studies of Indonesian government communication during other national crises similarly find that official narratives have struggled to keep pace with public and media scrutiny (Apriliyanti et al., 2022).

Several gaps, however, remain. Government public relations itself remains comparatively under-theorised as a field within public relations scholarship, with limited integration of ethical considerations into its dominant frameworks (Dong et al., 2023). Most GPR ethics scholarship draws on Western democratic contexts where accountability mechanisms, press freedom, and civil society functions operate differently from hybrid democracy settings, in which formal democratic procedures coexist with institutional checks on executive power that operate only weakly and inconsistently (Diamond, 2002; Levitsky & Way, 2010). The SCCT literature has given limited attention to the phenomenon of a crisis shifting cluster within a compressed timeframe as a direct result of criminal investigation rather than communication error. And the ethical question of what GPR practitioners are obligated to do when the policy they serve cannot

be honestly defended to the public has been underexplored, particularly in contexts where institutional culture pressures practitioners toward what can only be described as unconditional endorsement: what in Indonesian public administration is bluntly described as *asal bapak senang*, or doing whatever it takes to keep the boss satisfied, regardless of the public interest.

This article addresses these gaps through a close analysis of the BGN case, guided by the following research question: why does government communication respond to publicly resisted policies by reinforcing them and dismissing the resistance, rather than through GPR-led evaluation of that resistance? Our central argument is that this pattern reflects GPR's structural positioning as a technician function rather than a management function, a positioning that hybrid democracy governance reinforces by removing the external pressure that would otherwise force GPR toward a genuine counsellor role.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Spin Doctoring in Government Communication

The term spin doctoring entered political communication vocabulary in the 1980s, initially as journalistic shorthand for the work of campaign advisors who managed media narrative after political debates and public events. Over time, it migrated from electoral contexts into the broader practice of government communication, acquiring increasingly negative connotations as public awareness of its techniques grew. Valentini (2016) defines spin doctoring as public relations activities that emphasise or exaggerate the most positive aspects of something, often involving elements of deception and manipulation. Moloney (2006) goes further, arguing that spin doctoring reflects a Machiavellian communicative logic that systematically prioritises strategic effectiveness over honesty, making it structurally incompatible with democratic accountability. McNair (2007) characterises it as a form of political communication that instrumentalises information rather than sharing it, treating public audiences as targets to be managed rather than citizens to be informed.

This distinction matters because public relations and propaganda share many surface techniques: both use framing, message discipline, and audience segmentation. What separates them, following Moloney's (2006) broader argument, is not technique but ethical commitment. Public relations, practised to a professional standard, accepts a genuine obligation of truthfulness and a willingness to be held accountable to the publics it addresses, treating audiences as citizens capable of independent judgement. Propaganda dispenses with this obligation, treating audiences as targets to be moved regardless of what serves their interests. This ethical line is harder to hold in government public relations than in corporate public relations. Corporate PR operates within a single organisational mandate and a relatively bounded set of stakeholders. GPR, and political PR more specifically, contends with competing constituencies, partisan pressure, electoral incentives, and the state's unique authority to compel compliance, conditions that make the ethical commitment separating PR from propaganda harder to sustain and more consequential when it fails.

What distinguishes spin doctoring from legitimate strategic communication is not the use of framing, message discipline, or media management, all of which are standard professional tools. The distinction lies in the relationship between the communicator and truth. Gaber (2000), in his analysis of government communication in the Blair administration, identifies a spectrum of techniques ranging from overt and broadly legitimate practices such as press releases and media briefings, to covert techniques that cross into manipulation: the strategic leak of information to selected journalists, the deliberate flooding of the media environment with competing stories to bury inconvenient news, the reframing of policy failures as necessary sacrifices, and what he terms the dead bat, allowing a damaging story to exhaust itself through non-response rather than honest engagement.

This article introduces a concept not yet named in the literature: spin doctoring by default. This describes a condition distinct from deliberate spin. Where classic spin doctoring involves intentional narrative management by skilled communicators, spin doctoring by default occurs when the absence of strategic GPR counsel produces communication outcomes that are functionally equivalent to spin in their impact on public trust. When institutions respond to public scrutiny with reactive denial, opportunistic reframing, and political entrenchment because no one with communicative expertise was involved in designing the policy being questioned, the public experiences the same distortion of information as they would from deliberate spin, without the spin doctors. The public record of the BGN case, examined in the case analysis below, is consistent with this pattern: no evidence of a prepared communication strategy is documented, and the institutional response bears the structural signature of default rather than deliberate design.

Government Public Relations and the Counselor Role

Government public relations occupies a structurally ambiguous position in democratic governance. On one hand, GPR practitioners serve institutional clients, governments, agencies, and their political leadership. On the other hand, they serve the public interest in ways that no corporate communications function is required to do, because the institution they represent is funded by public taxation and exercises power on behalf of citizens. This dual constituency is the source of both the distinctive ethical obligations of GPR and its distinctive vulnerabilities.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) describe an evolutionary model of public relations practice, from one-way information dissemination to two-way symmetric communication, in which the most sophisticated and most ethical form of PR involves genuine dialogue between organisations and their publics, with each party willing to be influenced by the other. Applied to GPR, this model implies that communications professionals should not merely transmit government messages to citizens but should actively bring public sentiment, public concerns, and public questions back into the policy-making process.

White and Dozier (1992) distinguish between the PR technician, who executes communication tasks, and the PR manager or counselor, who

participates in organisational decision-making and advises leadership on the communicative implications of policy choices before those choices are made public. This distinction is central to understanding what failed in the BGN case. When GPR functions at the technician level, it has no capacity to raise questions about a procurement decision before that decision is announced. It can only react after the fact, by which point the institutional credibility damage has already begun.

This management-level positioning is best captured by the principle of *primus inter pares*, first among equals, borrowed from collegial governance structures in which one member holds a coordinating role without formal seniority over the others. Applied to GPR, the principle implies that the communications function belongs at the same table as finance, legal, and operational planning when a policy is still being shaped, not brought in afterward to explain what those other functions have already decided. When GPR functions as the last link in the chain, called in only after a policy has been approved and its budget locked, it inherits a decision it had no part in making and a set of communicative risks it had no opportunity to flag. Its only remaining task is to justify a *fait accompli*, which is precisely the condition under which spin doctoring by default and the devil's advocate function, described below, take their present form regardless of practitioner skill: once a decision's budget and timeline are locked, no amount of communicative competence can recover the input opportunity that closed before GPR was consulted.

This diagnosis is not abstract for Indonesia. In the White House, by comparison, communication functions are organised around specific, senior positions with clearly defined mandates: the Communications Director coordinates strategic messaging across the administration, and the Press Secretary manages daily public engagement while maintaining a close working relationship with the president (Center for Presidential Transition, n.d.). Indonesia's arrangement lacks this specificity. Public communication responsibility is currently distributed across several bodies whose mandates overlap without clear seniority or coordination. The Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs (Kementerian Komunikasi dan Digital), despite its name, is mandated chiefly to oversee digital infrastructure, telecommunications, and data protection rather than to counsel government on the communication of contested policy (Kementerian Komunikasi dan Digital Republik Indonesia, n.d.). The Government Communications Agency (Bakom), the body most directly tasked with disseminating strategic policy communication, was established only in September 2025, replacing the Presidential Communication Office that had itself existed for barely thirteen months (Peraturan Presiden Nomor 96 Tahun 2025, 2025). The Presidential Staff Office (Kantor Staf Presiden) performs adjacent communication and oversight functions of its own, as seen in its response to the BGN case, discussed below. This institutional churn and overlap is itself evidence of the absence this article describes: no single body currently holds a stable, ministerial-rank mandate to counsel the president on communicating policy that meets public resistance.

This counselor function includes what organisational behaviour scholars call the devil's advocate role: the deliberate introduction of dissent into a decision-making process to counter the pressure toward premature consensus that Janis (1972) identifies as groupthink. Applied to GPR, this function operates in two ways. First, once a policy has been decided, GPR counsel prepares the institution to explain that decision to the public credibly and coherently, anticipating the questions a critical audience will ask and ensuring answers exist before those questions are asked. Second, and prior to that, GPR counsel is positioned to return to the client, the minister, the president, the agency head, with an honest assessment of how the public is likely to receive a policy still under consideration, recommending either a communication strategy adequate to the resistance anticipated, or, where no such strategy is credible, that the policy itself be reconsidered or evaluated before implementation. Both functions require GPR to be present before a decision is finalised, not after. Where institutional culture rewards affirmation over dissent, this devil's advocate function has no space to operate, and GPR is reduced to explaining decisions it had no opportunity to question.

Hallahan et al. (2007) define strategic communication as purposeful communication used by organisations to fulfil their mission, emphasising that strategic communicators must understand not only how to send messages but how to shape the organisational environment in which communication occurs. Applied to government, this means GPR must be positioned early enough in the policy development process to perform what we call *communication risk assessment*: the systematic evaluation of how a planned policy or procurement decision will be received by different public constituencies, what questions it will generate, and whether honest answers to those questions can be prepared before they are demanded. This function, absent in the BGN case, is what separates reactive crisis communication from genuine strategic communication.

In Indonesian public administration, the structural barriers to this counselor role are compounded by a deeply embedded institutional culture. The phenomenon locally described as *asal bapak senang*, literally 'as long as the boss is satisfied,' describes a pattern in which subordinates, including communications staff, prioritise the approval of superiors over the accuracy of information or the interest of external constituents. Within this culture, GPR practitioners face institutional pressure to function as endorsers rather than counselors, affirming rather than questioning, facilitating rather than advising against. This culture is not unique to Indonesia, but it is particularly pronounced in governance systems with strong hierarchical traditions and limited institutional protection for professional dissent. Even Indonesia's most visible government communication function, the Presidential Palace's press and media bureau, has been found to prioritise access control and message discipline over the kind of upward, corrective communication a counsellor-level GPR function would provide (Alvin, 2025).

SCCT and the Dynamics of Crisis Phase Transition

Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory provides the most widely used framework for matching crisis response strategy to crisis type (Coombs, 2019, 2022). SCCT classifies crises into three clusters based on the degree of organisational responsibility attributed by publics. In the victim cluster, the organisation is itself a victim of forces outside its control, and public attribution of responsibility is low. In the accidental cluster, the organisation is responsible for the crisis but did not intend the harmful outcome, and responsibility attribution is moderate. In the preventable cluster, the organisation knowingly took actions that placed others at risk or violated ethical norms, and responsibility attribution is high.

Each cluster carries a prescribed response strategy. For victim cluster crises, denial and excuse may be appropriate. For accidental crises, diminishment strategies that acknowledge the event while minimising organisational responsibility can be effective. For preventable crises, SCCT prescribes mortification: full acceptance of responsibility, expression of remorse, and commitment to corrective action. Using a lower response posture than the crisis warrants damages reputation further; using a higher posture than necessary creates unnecessary liability.

Social media has been shown to accelerate how publics attribute responsibility during a crisis, compressing the time institutions have to recognise and respond to shifting circumstances (Zhao et al., 2020). A phenomenon that the SCCT literature has not yet adequately theorised is crisis cluster transition: the movement of a single event from one cluster to another as new information emerges. The BGN case provides a clear instance of this. When the electric motorcycle procurement first became public in April 2026, the crisis could reasonably have been classified as accidental. The appropriate response at that stage was diminishment combined with corrective action. By June 2026, when the Attorney General's Office named five suspects including the agency's former director on corruption charges, the crisis had transitioned to the preventable cluster. This transition fundamentally changed what SCCT prescribes: the only SCCT-consistent response at this stage was mortification, which did not come.

Democratic Betrayal as an Ethical Dimension of GPR Failure

The argument that spins doctoring in public welfare policy constitutes a betrayal of democratic accountability is not merely rhetorical. It rests on a specific understanding of the ethical obligations that distinguish government communication from all other forms of institutional PR.

Habermas (1989) argues that democratic legitimacy depends on the existence of a public sphere in which citizens can access honest information about the exercise of public power and engage in rational deliberation about collective decisions. When institutions that hold public power systematically distort or withhold information about how that power is exercised, they undermine the communicative conditions on which democratic legitimacy depends. This is not simply a policy failure; it is a democratic failure.

The PRSA Code of Ethics (2021) and the Global Alliance Stockholm Accords (2018) both articulate that PR practitioners bear professional obligations

not only to their institutional clients but to the public. Applied to GPR specifically, these principles generate a clear but demanding ethical standard. The primary constituency of a government communications professional is not the minister, director, or president they serve. It is the public whose taxes fund the programs being communicated and whose lives are affected by the policies being promoted.

In the BGN case, the ethical failure was not simply that spin doctoring occurred. The deeper failure is that no one with the professional standing and institutional positioning to perform this ethical function appears to have been present in the policy-making process at all. The public record shows an institution that could not be honest with the public through any evident communicative architecture for honesty, whatever the intentions of the individuals involved. Spin doctoring by default, in this sense, is also ethics by default: the documentary record gives no indication that the ethical obligations of GPR were deliberately abandoned, only that the function that should have carried them does not appear to have existed. The following section argues that this structural absence follows the logic of hybrid democracy governance, rather than any peculiarity of Indonesia's institutions.

GPR in Hybrid Democracy Contexts

Hybrid democracy describes political systems that combine the formal procedures of democratic governance, competitive elections, a nominal separation of powers, and constitutional guarantees of rights, with practices that concentrate power in ways that weaken the mechanisms meant to hold that power accountable (Diamond, 2002). Levitsky and Way (2010) extend this account through the concept of competitive authoritarianism, in which political competition exists but rarely on a level playing field: incumbents retain durable advantages over the information environment, and formal checks such as courts, oversight bodies, and a critical press continue to operate, but inconsistently and often at the discretion of those already in power.

These conditions carry direct implications for GPR practice. In a hybrid democracy, the structural incentive facing government communicators is not two-way accountability in the sense Grunig and Hunt (1984) describe, but one-way legitimation: communication that projects institutional authority downward and discourages dissent rather than surfacing it upward for correction. This tendency is compounded where, as in Indonesian public administration, institutional culture already discourages the kind of upward, corrective communication that a counsellor-level GPR function would provide, as discussed above in relation to the counselor role. Hybrid democracy does not merely coexist with this institutional culture; it removes much of the external pressure, from an independent press, an assertive civil society, or an opposition able to impose political costs, that in a fuller democracy would otherwise force GPR toward genuine responsiveness.

Where these accountability mechanisms are attenuated, GPR does not need to be genuinely responsive to survive; it needs only to be minimally plausible until public attention moves elsewhere. Seen through this lens, spin

doctoring by default, introduced earlier in this framework, is not an anomaly explained solely by one agency's poor planning. It is a structurally probable outcome of GPR practised within a hybrid democracy, where the absence of a counsellor function is rarely corrected because the surrounding institutional environment does not require it to be. Grunig's two-way symmetric model remains the normative aspiration for GPR practice, but hybrid democracy makes that aspiration structurally difficult to realise without deliberate institutional design that protects the counsellor function this article argues is missing.

These conditions carry a direct implication for how policy should be implemented under hybrid democracy. Public resistance to a policy is not, by itself, evidence that the policy is mistaken; it is a signal that requires evaluation before a government decides how to respond. A GPR function positioned at the management level would treat that resistance as information to be assessed through structured, two-way communication, rather than as an obstacle to be overridden or a critic to be dismissed. Repressive, one-way responses to resistance, insisting a policy proceed regardless of the criticism it draws, are a communicative strategy suited to earlier eras of information control; they are increasingly untenable, and increasingly costly to legitimacy, under the digital conditions described in the introduction.

A parallel pattern appears in Koperasi Desa Merah Putih (KDMP), another flagship Prabowo-era program. In 2026, the state enterprise PT Agrinas Pangan Nusantara imported 105,000 pickup trucks from India at a contract value of Rp 24.66 trillion, drawing criticism from parliament and Indonesia Corruption Watch over transparency, the bypassing of domestic industry, and allegations of rent-seeking through an intermediary (Hidayat & Armi, 2026; Rayanti, 2026). Parliament requested a postponement pending review; the import proceeded regardless (Amrin, 2026). The recurrence of this pattern across two flagship programs suggests a structural tendency rather than an isolated failure.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative case study design, following the approach articulated by Yin (2018), who defines the case study as an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. The BGN electric motorcycle procurement case meets Yin's criteria for a suitable case study subject: it is a bounded, contemporaneous event with multiple evidentiary sources involving complex institutional, communicative, and ethical dimensions. It also represents what Flyvbjerg (2006) calls a critical case, one whose analysis yields insights that carry implications beyond the specific case itself.

The unit of analysis is the institutional communication of BGN in relation to the electric motorcycle procurement controversy, from April 2026 through July 2026. This three-month window captures both phases of the crisis and the transition between them.

Data Collection

Data were collected from publicly available documentary sources across four categories. The first comprises media coverage from national Indonesian

outlets with established editorial standards (including Kompas.com, Tempo, Jakarta Globe, Kumparan, CNBC Indonesia, Detik, and Viva.co.id) and, where available, English-language international coverage. The second comprises official institutional communications, including publicly available statements from BGN and related government officials. The third comprises legal and audit documentation in the public domain, including statements from the Attorney General's Office and audit findings from BPKP as reported through verified media sources. The fourth comprises foundational regulatory documents establishing BGN's mandate, used to establish the formal communicative obligations against which the institution's observed practice is assessed. Contextual material drawn on elsewhere in the article, including comparative background on the KDMP case and national survey data on public approval, was sourced separately from outside this core case corpus and is not part of the primary evidentiary basis for the case analysis that follows.

Data Analysis

Analysis proceeds through two complementary lenses. The first is Entman's (1993) framing analysis, which examines how texts select and emphasise certain aspects of reality while excluding others. Applied to institutional communication, framing analysis allows identification not only of what officials said but what they chose not to say, which aspects they amplified, and which they deflected. The second is SCCT, used as an evaluative framework for assessing the appropriateness of institutional responses relative to the crisis cluster at each phase.

Validity and Limitations

Triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple independent source categories, cross-referencing factual claims across at least two sources. As a single case study, the findings are not statistically generalisable; the goal is analytical generalisation following Yin (2018): testing and extending theoretical propositions about spin doctoring by default and GPR ethics. A second limitation is the exclusive reliance on publicly available documentation, which limits claims about individual intent and reinforces the study's focus on structural rather than personal failure.

Case Analysis

Phase 1: The Reputational Crisis (April 2026)

The public controversy surrounding BGN's electric motorcycle procurement did not emerge from an investigative report or a government disclosure. It began with a video shared on social media showing a warehouse filled with thousands of motorcycles bearing the BGN logo, still wrapped in protective packaging (Saputra & Nugroho, 2026). The video asked a question that no official had apparently prepared to answer: what do motorcycles have to do with providing nutritious meals to children?

The procurement involved 21,801 electric motorcycles at approximately Rp 42 million per unit, totalling approximately Rp 1 trillion. The stated purpose

was to provide operational vehicles for SPPG coordinators managing meal distribution under the MBG program. The operational logic was not implausible on its face. What was entirely absent was any prior communication explaining this logic to the public before the procurement became visible.

This absence was not for lack of a formal mandate. Presidential Regulation No. 83 of 2024, which established BGN and defines its functions, explicitly tasks the agency with conducting public communication, program socialisation, and nutrition education through various media channels to build public awareness (Peraturan Presiden Nomor 83 Tahun 2024, 2024). The regulatory obligation to communicate with the public existed from BGN's founding; what is absent from the documentary record is any evidence that this obligation was operationalised as a management-level function capable of anticipating and responding to a procurement decision of this scale.

What resulted is the first and most fundamental communicative failure in the case. Procurement of 21,801 vehicles at Rp 1 trillion from public funds, in a program whose stated purpose is child nutrition, is precisely the kind of decision that requires a prepared public communication strategy before it is executed. A GPR function operating at the counselor level would have identified this need and developed response materials before the first motorcycle was delivered. None of this existed.

Nor was this absence for lack of an available check. The Ministry of Finance reportedly objected to the procurement before it was realised, and Commission IX of the House of Representatives, which oversees the ministries responsible for the program, stated publicly that it had never been consulted on the purchase and would have rejected it had it been asked (Lestari, 2026). The objection existed; what was missing was any GPR function positioned to carry that objection into the decision, or to prepare the institution for the scrutiny that followed once the objection proved to have been ignored.

When the video circulated, the institutional response exhibited three characteristics that Gaber (2000) identifies as covert spin techniques deployed reactively. The first was denial: officials disputed reported figures, focusing on factual correction rather than substantive justification. The second was reframing: the procurement was described as necessary for reaching remote areas, a claim with operational validity but offered without supporting data. The third was the dead bat: no senior official with institutional authority offered a substantive public response for an extended period, allowing the controversy to develop without counter-narrative.

Multiple officials from different government functions made public statements, but these were inconsistent in characterising the procurement's purpose, budget source, and necessity (Saputra & Nugroho, 2026). This inconsistency is characteristic of institutions where communication is not coordinated by a strategic GPR function. Applying SCCT, the crisis as of April 2026 could reasonably have been classified as accidental, warranting diminishment combined with corrective action. This response did not materialise.

Phase 2: The Criminal Crisis (June–July 2026)

The crisis entered its second phase on 3 June 2026, when the Attorney General's Office named five suspects in a corruption investigation into BGN's procurement practices, including the agency's former director and two former deputy directors (Adriansyah, 2026). Charges alleged systematic procurement fraud including price mark-up across multiple categories of goods: electric motorcycles, tablet computers, shoes, and large-screen televisions. A BPKP audit subsequently found annual budget waste of Rp 10.5 trillion (AlFarisi & Ramadhan, 2026). This waste occurred against a backdrop of mounting fiscal pressure: by March 2026, Indonesia's state budget deficit had reached Rp 240.1 trillion, an increase economists attributed substantially to accelerated MBG spending, prompting public calls to rationalise the program's budget as a condition for fiscal stability (Romualdus, 2026).

The timeline reveals the depth of the institutional communication failure. On the morning of 2 June 2026, the former director was publicly accompanying senior government officials at a program review event. By that evening, he had been removed. By early the following morning, he had been detained by prosecutors (Wiryo, 2026). This sequence is not consistent with an institution engaged in proactive communication management.

The institutional response was dominated by two rhetorical strategies, neither consistent with SCCT's prescriptions for a preventable cluster crisis. The first was political entrenchment: senior officials defended the program's continuation on grounds of democratic mandate, stating that demanding its cessation would be a grave mistake (Prabowosubianto.com, 2026). This conflated the program's policy mandate with the criminal conduct of its implementing leadership and offered no acknowledgment of institutional failures. The second was society-wide reframing: citizens were publicly urged to stop debating the program, with the Minister of Finance framing continued public scrutiny as an obstacle to the President's own efforts to fix the program's management (Fadilah, 2026; Saputra & Nugroho, 2026). A related reframing came from the Presidential Staff Office, which characterised the leadership change and the ongoing legal process as evidence that the government was “responsive and transparent,” rather than as evidence of a prior communicative failure (Yanwardhana, 2026). This is a textbook example of what Gaber (2000) calls agenda displacement: phrases such as “grave mistake,” demands to “stop debating,” and claims of being “responsive and transparent” do more than frame the issue, they work to delegitimise continued scrutiny itself, recasting public accountability as an obstacle to good governance rather than a legitimate democratic function. This framing did not originate from a single voice: it was echoed independently across the Ministry of Finance and the Presidential Staff Office, an illustration of how, consistent with the hybrid democracy lens developed earlier in this article, a dominant executive can draw on institutional standing to discourage debate rather than to invite it.

Applying SCCT, neither response is appropriate for a preventable cluster crisis, which prescribes mortification. By July 2026, the crisis had deepened further. BGN's replacement director resigned after 45 days, with the Attorney

General's Office simultaneously noting the possibility of her examination in the ongoing investigation (Wiryo, 2026; Robbani, 2026). A third director was appointed. The revolving leadership, combined with the absence of any sustained institutional communication strategy, left BGN without the organisational capacity to perform even the basic communicative functions that mortification would require.

Spin Doctoring by Default: The Anatomy of a Structural Failure

The preceding analysis reveals a pattern distinct from what the spin doctoring literature typically describes. Classic spin doctoring involves skilled communicators who deliberately manage information environments to protect institutional or political interests. It requires a functioning communications operation, prepared messaging, media relationships, and the capacity to execute narrative strategies in real time. None of these elements were evident in the BGN case.

What the evidence shows is not strategic communication that crossed ethical lines but the near-total absence of strategic communication. The denial, reframing, and agenda displacement that occurred show no documented evidence of being outputs of a coordinated spin operation. The public record is more consistent with improvised responses by institutional actors working without a prepared communication framework. This is what we mean by spin doctoring by default.

Three structural conditions produced this outcome. First, there is no evidence that strategic communications professionals were involved in the planning or approval of the motorcycle procurement. Had they been, the communication risk would have been immediately visible. Second, the institutional culture of *asal bapak senang* systematically suppresses the devil's advocate function described earlier in relation to the counselor role that GPR counselors need to perform. In an institution where the primary professional obligation is to affirm leadership decisions rather than question them, the communicative early warning function that could have prevented this crisis is structurally impossible. Third, the absence of a designated, empowered spokesperson meant that multiple officials spoke independently, producing inconsistency that amplified rather than contained the reputational damage. These structural conditions did not arise in isolation. The discussion of GPR in hybrid democracy contexts situates this within hybrid democracy governance: the external pressures that might otherwise force institutional change simply operate too weakly here to compel it.

What the BGN Case Reveals About GPR Positioning

The BGN case illustrates a structural problem that affects government communication in many hybrid democracy contexts but is rarely documented with this degree of empirical detail: the systematic positioning of GPR as a technician function, downstream of policy decisions, rather than a management function positioned upstream of them. Communications staff were positioned to explain decisions that had already been made and executed, not to assess the communicative risks of decisions before they were finalised.

This positioning is consequential because communication risk in welfare policy is not a peripheral concern that can be managed after the fact. No amount of message discipline, spokesperson training, or media strategy can bridge a gap between institutional action and public expectation that is as wide as the one the BGN motorcycle procurement created. A basic principle applies directly here: a communication function can only produce outputs as credible as the inputs it is working with. When the input is a procurement decision that cannot withstand honest public scrutiny, no communication system can generate sustained public trust.

The implication for GPR positioning is direct. If communications professionals had been present at the point when the motorcycle procurement was being designed and approved, one of two outcomes would have followed: either the procurement would have been redesigned to address the communicative risk, or the communications professional would have identified that no credible public justification existed and escalated that finding as a risk that leadership needed to consciously accept. Either outcome would have been preferable to what occurred.

These consequences extend beyond the reputational and financial costs already documented. In a hybrid democracy, spin doctoring by default weakens democratic accountability directly: when GPR fails at the counsellor level, citizens are denied not only accurate information about a specific procurement decision but the broader capacity to hold the institutions that spend their taxes to account before that spending metastasises into criminal conduct. The BGN case suggests that democratic accountability in hybrid democracy contexts depends, in part, on a function, ethically grounded GPR counsel, that formal democratic procedure does not by itself guarantee. This is not a peculiarity of a single agency: the KDMP case discussed earlier in relation to hybrid democracy, a separate flagship program in which a large-scale procurement proceeded despite parliamentary objection, exhibits the same pattern of resistance met with continuation rather than evaluation, suggesting a structural tendency across government institutions rather than an isolated failure specific to BGN.

Government Communication Ethics as Obligation, Not Option

The most important theoretical contribution of this article is the argument that GPR ethics cannot be understood as a discretionary professional standard but as a constitutive obligation of the practice itself, one whose violation undermines the legitimacy of government communication as a social function.

This argument follows from the nature of GPR's constituency. Citizens cannot withdraw from their government the way consumers can withdraw from a brand. This asymmetry places a heavier ethical burden on GPR than on any other form of institutional communication. A communication act that systematically distorts the understanding of its audience is not merely an unethical act: it is, in a philosophically significant sense, not genuine communication. It is the simulation of communication in the service of institutional self-protection.

When GPR practitioners in government function as unconditional endorsers, affirming institutional decisions regardless of their public defensibility, they are not performing GPR. They are performing a degraded simulation of it, one that retains the institutional form of communication without its substantive function, which is to build genuine understanding between institutions and publics. The ethical standard we propose is demanding but not unreasonable: GPR practitioners in government bear a professional obligation to the public as a primary constituency, not merely a secondary one to be served after institutional interests are protected. Spin doctoring in welfare policy funded by public taxation is not a regrettable strategic misstep. It is a betrayal of democratic accountability: of the public that pays for the program being misrepresented, and of the broader capacity of citizens to hold the institutions that spend their taxes to account.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes four contributions to the existing literature. The first, and most central, is empirical evidence for GPR's positioning as a technician function rather than a management function as an explanation for why government communication responds to public resistance by reinforcing policy and dismissing criticism rather than evaluating it. This distinction, drawn from White and Dozier (1992), has previously been discussed mainly in normative terms; this article demonstrates its explanatory power in a documented case of government communication failure, and traces its structural roots to hybrid democracy governance.

The second contribution is the concept of spin doctoring by default as a theoretically distinct phenomenon. The existing literature focuses primarily on intentional narrative management. Spin doctoring by default describes a different mechanism that produces similar public outcomes without requiring deliberate intent, occurring when structural absence of strategic GPR counsel leaves institutions capable only of improvised, reactive, inconsistent responses. Naming this concept allows researchers and practitioners to diagnose communication failures that would otherwise be misclassified as deliberate spin, missing the structural conditions that produced them, or as mere incompetence, missing their ethical implications. Beyond the single case examined here, the concept extends to a structurally probable outcome of GPR practice within hybrid democracy governance generally: where accountability mechanisms operate only weakly, GPR does not need to be genuinely responsive to survive, and the counsellor function this article argues is missing has little external pressure compelling its restoration, with direct implications for how GPR practice might need to be redesigned in other hybrid democracy settings.

The third contribution is the application of SCCT to crisis cluster transition as a distinct analytical problem. Most SCCT scholarship focuses on prescribing appropriate responses for stable crisis classifications. The BGN case demonstrates that crises can shift cluster within a compressed timeframe in ways that fundamentally change what SCCT prescribes, and that failure to recognise this transition compounds the reputational damage of the original crisis.

The fourth contribution is the explicit articulation of the dual constituency model of GPR ethics: the argument that government communications practitioners bear professional obligations to the public as a primary constituency, not merely as a secondary one. While this principle is implicit in major professional codes, it is rarely operationalised in the GPR ethics literature in ways that generate specific professional obligations. This article's argument that spins doctoring in public welfare policy constitutes democratic betrayal provides a more demanding and more specific ethical standard than the existing literature offers.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATION

The BGN case shows that government communication can respond to publicly resisted policy by reinforcing it and dismissing the resistance when GPR is positioned as a technician function rather than a management function. Absent from the policy-making process and unable to perform a devil's advocate role, GPR could neither evaluate public resistance before it escalated nor communicate that evaluation upward; hybrid democracy's weak external accountability removes the pressure that would otherwise force this positioning to change. The consequence is a betrayal of GPR's professional obligation to the public and of the democratic accountability that legitimate government communication depends on, evident not only in the BGN case but in the parallel pattern observed in KDMP.

The implication for practice is direct. Public resistance to a policy is a signal to be evaluated, not an obstacle to be overridden or a critic to be discredited: killing the messenger removes the information a government needs to correct course without removing the problem the message described. Governments serious about institutional credibility must position GPR at the management level, present in policy-making from the earliest stages and empowered to evaluate resistance rather than simply defend decisions already made. At the presidential level specifically, this means a GPR function led by an official of ministerial or deputy-ministerial rank, with sufficient command of public policy to carry credibility as a devil's advocate among cabinet-level decision-makers, rather than a subordinate spokesperson brought in only to announce decisions already made.

Future research should test this pattern comparatively, across hybrid democracy contexts and institutional cultures, and against additional cases such as KDMP, to establish how generalisable the technician-management distinction is as an explanation for government communication failure.

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