

## Formative Research as a Strategic Foundation of Public Relations in Digital News Media: A Case Study of Tribunews

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### Abstract

*In the digital media environment, news organizations face increasing pressure to maintain credibility and audience trust amid intense competition and fragmented media consumption. Within this context, public relations plays a strategic role in supporting reputation management and audience engagement. This study examines how formative research is conducted as part of the public relations strategy of Tribunews, one of Indonesia's largest digital news media networks, in building its image as a credible local media organization. This research employs a qualitative approach using a case study method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with key organizational actors and supported by internal document analysis. Drawing on Ronald D. Smith's strategic public relations framework, the analysis focuses exclusively on the formative research phase, which includes situation analysis, organizational analysis, and public analysis. The findings indicate that Tribunews conducts formative research by identifying strategic challenges related to market competition and socio-cultural diversity, aligning internal organizational values and communication structures, and continuously monitoring audience perceptions through research-based approaches. Public relations functions are institutionally integrated within the Marketing Communication division, enabling research findings to directly inform strategic communication decisions. This integrated approach allows Tribunews to adopt ethical, listening-oriented communication practices in responding to public issues. The study highlights the importance of formative research as a strategic foundation for public relations planning in digital news media organizations. The findings contribute to public relations scholarship by extending empirical analysis of formative research to the context of online journalism and offer practical insights for media practitioners in sustaining credibility and public trust in the digital era.*

*Keywords: public relations, formative research, digital news media, strategic communication, local media*

## INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has profoundly reshaped the structure, practices, and power relations within contemporary news media. The proliferation of digital platforms has altered how news is produced, distributed, and consumed, accelerating information flows while intensifying competition for audience attention. News organizations no longer operate as the sole gatekeepers of public information instead, they function within a platform-dominated ecosystem in which algorithms, engagement metrics, and audience data increasingly shape editorial visibility and organizational strategies. Research on digital platforms and journalism highlights that platform dependency has redefined media visibility, audience reach, and economic sustainability, particularly for news organizations operating in competitive digital environments (Wilding et al., 2018).

These transformations have been especially consequential for local media organizations. Traditionally, local media have played a critical role in providing contextually grounded information, representing regional identities, and facilitating public discourse at the community level. Studies on local journalism emphasize that local news fosters a sense of belonging, strengthens civic engagement, and contributes to social cohesion by addressing issues embedded in everyday life. In culturally diverse countries such as Indonesia, local media serve not only as information providers but also as mediators of social realities shaped by geography, culture, and regional interests (Zhang, 2025).

However, the digitalization of journalism has placed local media in an increasingly precarious position. While digital platforms enable broader reach and faster dissemination, they also intensify competition with national and global media organizations that possess superior technological infrastructure, financial resources, and brand recognition. As a result, local media are compelled to navigate a complex landscape in which visibility, relevance, and economic viability must be balanced against journalistic credibility and public responsibility. Research on hyperlocal media indicates that although proximity and local relevance remain central strengths, local media increasingly face challenges in sustaining their role as representative local public spaces amid intensified global information flows and digital transformation (Jati, 2025).

Within this environment, public trust and organizational image have emerged as strategic concerns rather than secondary outcomes of journalistic performance. Digital audiences are increasingly selective, relying on perceived credibility, ethical standards, and relevance when choosing news sources (Tandoc et al., 2018). Studies on audience trust in online journalism demonstrate that engagement-driven practices, such as sensational headlines or clickbait strategies, may

enhance short-term traffic while simultaneously generating skepticism and eroding long-term trust (Devina & Irawan, 2021). This tension illustrates a central dilemma faced by digital news organizations: how to remain competitive within algorithm-driven ecosystems without compromising credibility and public legitimacy.

In Indonesia's digital media landscape, this dilemma is particularly visible among large local media networks that operate at both regional and national levels. Tribunnews.com represents a prominent case in this regard. Operating under the Tribun Network, Tribunnews manages dozens of regional news portals distributed across Indonesia, integrating local news production within a nationally visible digital platform (Tribunnews, 2022). Its editorial identity emphasizes hyperlocal journalism, articulated through the narrative "*Mata Lokal Menjangkau Indonesia*," which positions local perspectives as the foundation of national news coverage. This model allows Tribunnews to combine regional proximity with national reach, differentiating it from centralized national media outlets.

Audience metrics further highlight Tribunnews' significance within the digital news ecosystem. According to Similarweb (2024), Tribunnews.com consistently ranks among the top five most visited news websites in Indonesia, competing directly with major national platforms such as Detik.com and Kompas.com. In November 2024 alone, the site recorded more than 117 million visits, reflecting substantial audience engagement and sustained digital visibility. These figures indicate that Tribunnews is not merely a peripheral local outlet, but a major actor within Indonesia's online news market.

Despite this strong market position, Tribunnews has also faced reputational challenges associated with perceptions of clickbait journalism. As noted in studies on Indonesian online news media, clickbait practices are frequently employed to attract audience attention in highly competitive digital environments, often blurring the line between news value and sensationalism (Devina & Irawan, 2021). While such practices may be economically advantageous in the short term, they risk undermining audience trust and reinforcing negative perceptions regarding journalistic quality. This ambivalence underscores the complexity of image management for digital news organizations operating under both market and normative pressures.

These challenges highlight the strategic relevance of public relations within media organizations. Public relations in the media context extends beyond promotional communication and functions as a managerial process that supports reputation management, relationship building, and organizational legitimacy. In contrast to corporate public relations, which may prioritize branding or market positioning,

public relations in news organizations must operate within normative expectations related to public responsibility, transparency, and journalistic ethics. Research on media relations in evolving digital environments demonstrates that public relations increasingly function as a strategic mediator between media institutions, journalists, audiences, and external stakeholders, particularly in conditions of accelerated information flows and heightened public scrutiny (Hartiana, 2024).

Scholars further argue that organizational image is not formed incidentally but emerges through sustained interaction between organizational behavior, communication practices, and public perception (Rachmawati et al., 2024). In digital environments where public responses are immediate and highly visible, media organizations must engage in proactive analysis to anticipate reputational risks and align communication strategies with audience values. This condition necessitates a research-based approach to public relations planning, one that emphasizes understanding context before implementing communication strategies.

One of the most influential frameworks for such an approach is Ronald D. Smith's strategic public relations model. Smith conceptualizes public relations as a systematic and research-driven process consisting of four interrelated phases: formative research, strategy formulation, tactical implementation, and evaluative research (Smith, 2017). Among these phases, formative research serves as the analytical foundation upon which all subsequent decisions are built. It involves systematic data collection and analysis to understand situational conditions, organizational characteristics, and public dynamics prior to the execution of communication programs.

Formative research is particularly relevant for media organizations operating in complex and heterogeneous environments. Situation analysis enables organizations to identify external challenges, competitive pressures, and socio-cultural factors shaping public discourse. Organizational analysis focuses on internal structures, values, and communication roles, ensuring alignment between institutional identity and strategic actions. Public analysis examines audience characteristics, expectations, and potential responses, allowing organizations to anticipate public reactions and manage relationships responsibly (Smith, 2017). Together, these components provide a comprehensive understanding of the communication environment before strategic decisions are enacted.

Despite its theoretical importance, formative research has received limited empirical attention in studies of digital journalism and media communication.

Existing research on online media tends to emphasize content strategies, audience engagement metrics, or platform algorithms, often overlooking the preparatory research processes that precede strategic communication decisions. In the Indonesian context, scholarly work has largely focused on media credibility, political communication, or news consumption patterns, leaving the formative stages of public relations planning underexplored.

This gap is particularly evident in research on local digital media. While local and hyperlocal media face distinctive challenges related to audience fragmentation, regional diversity, and organizational scale, few studies have examined how these organizations systematically analyze their environments prior to implementing communication strategies. Understanding formative research practices within local digital media institutions is therefore essential for explaining how such organizations manage reputation, sustain audience trust, and maintain legitimacy within platform-dominated news ecosystems.

Against this backdrop, Tribunnews provides a valuable empirical setting for examining formative research as a strategic foundation of public relations in digital news media. Its extensive local network, strong market presence, and ongoing reputational negotiations offer insight into how formative research is operationalized within a complex media organization. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how formative research is conducted as part of Tribunnews' public relations strategy in the digital media context. Drawing on Ronald D. Smith's formative research framework, this research focuses specifically on situation analysis, organizational analysis, and public analysis as strategic foundations for communication planning. Using a qualitative case study approach, the study explores how Tribunnews identifies strategic challenges, aligns internal communication roles, and understands audience perceptions prior to the implementation of public relations programs.

By concentrating on the formative research stage, this study contributes theoretically by extending the application of Smith's framework to local digital media organizations, empirically by providing insight into research-based communication practices within Indonesia's media landscape, and practically by offering guidance for media practitioners on the importance of systematic research in developing credible, ethical, and context-sensitive public relations strategies in the digital era.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative research method using a semi-structured interview approach to examine how formative research functions as a strategic

foundation of public relations within a digital news organization. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aims to explore strategic communication practices, organizational reasoning, and contextual decision-making processes from the perspectives of key organizational actors, rather than to measure variables or test hypotheses (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research was designed as a descriptive case study to allow an in-depth examination of public relations practices within their real-life organizational context. This approach is suitable for investigating contemporary organizational phenomena in which communication strategies, institutional structures, and environmental conditions are closely intertwined (Yin, 2018). Tribunnews was selected as the case because it represents one of the largest local digital media networks in Indonesia and operates within a highly competitive digital news environment while emphasizing hyperlocal journalism with national reach. Focusing on a single, information-rich case enables deeper analytical insight into formative research practices prior to the implementation of public relations strategies.

Data collection was conducted primarily through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This interview format allows researchers to explore predefined topics while maintaining flexibility for informants to elaborate on issues they consider significant. Each interview was conducted once, with a duration ranging from approximately 45 to 90 minutes. An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing follow-up questions to emerge during the discussion. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the informants to ensure accurate data capture and to facilitate the production of verbatim interview transcripts for analysis (McGrath et al., 2019).

Informants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that participants possessed strategic knowledge and direct involvement in public relations–related communication activities. Three key informants participated in this study: the Chief Executive Officer of Tribun Network, the Marketing Communication Manager, and the Marketing Communication Superintendent. Within the organizational structure of Tribunnews, public relations functions are not organized as a standalone department. Instead, these functions are institutionally integrated within the Marketing Communication division. This organizational arrangement was explicitly confirmed during the interview process with senior management. The Marketing Communication division manages corporate communication functions, including organizational positioning, internal communication, external stakeholder engagement, and reputation management, which collectively constitute public relations functions within the organization. On

this basis, the selection of Marketing Communication personnel as informants is methodologically appropriate for examining public relations strategy at Tribunnews.

In addition to interviews, internal organizational documents were analyzed to support and contextualize the interview data. These documents included communication guidelines, campaign materials, audience research reports, and internal presentations related to organizational positioning and public communication. The use of multiple data sources enabled the researcher to examine consistency across different forms of evidence and to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Data analysis was conducted through a pattern matching technique. Verbatim interview transcripts and organizational documents were systematically reviewed and coded based on the three components of formative research: situation analysis, organizational analysis, and public analysis. Empirical patterns identified from the data were then compared with conceptual patterns derived from the formative research framework to assess their alignment. This process facilitated a structured interpretation of how formative research informs strategic decision-making prior to the implementation of public relations programs (Smith, 2017; Yin, 2018).

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation was applied by comparing insights from different informants and cross-checking interview data with internal documents. Perspectives from senior management were examined alongside operational insights from the Marketing Communication team to identify convergent interpretations. This approach reduces reliance on a single data source and strengthens the credibility of the analysis by grounding interpretations in multiple forms of empirical evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study based on in depth interviews with key organizational actors and supported by internal document analysis. The analysis focuses exclusively on the formative research phase of public relations strategy as proposed Ronald D. Smith (2017), which consists of situation analysis, organizational analysis, and public analysis. Rather than examining strategy implementation or evaluation, this section elaborates how formative research is applied as a strategic foundation for public relations planning at Tribunnews within the context of digital news media.

To provide an overview of how empirical findings align with the formative research framework, Table 1 summarizes the mapping between Tribunnews’ public relations practices and each component of the formative research phase. This mapping serves as an analytical guide for the discussion presented in the subsequent sections.

**Table 1. Mapping Tribunnews’ Public Relations Practices to the Formative Research Phase**

<b>Formative Research Components (Smith, 2017)</b>	Tribunnews’ Key Practices	Empirical Evidence
<b>Situation Analysis</b>	Identifying market competition, audience fragmentation, and socio-cultural diversity as strategic challenges in the Indonesian media landscape	CEO interview
<b>Organizational Analysis</b>	Aligning internal vision, purpose, and communication roles through the “Mata Lokal Menjangkau Indonesia” narrative	CEO and Marketing Communication interviews
<b>Public Analysis</b>	Monitoring audience perceptions through surveys, sentiment analysis, and media monitoring	Marketing Communication interviews and internal documents

Table 1 summarizes how Tribunnews’ public relations practices correspond to the formative research phase. Each component is elaborated in detail in the following sections based on empirical findings.

Building on the analytical mapping presented in Table 1, the following sub-sections discuss how each component of formative research is applied in practice at Tribunnews. The discussion integrates interview data and documentary evidence to illustrate how formative research informs strategic decision-making prior to the implementation of public relations programs.

### **Situation Analysis: Strategic Issues and Market Positioning**

The findings indicate that Tribunnews approaches situation analysis as a foundational step in shaping its public relations strategy. As a digital media organization operating in a competitive environment, Tribunnews recognizes that effective communication requires a deep understanding of audience needs, expectations, and socio-cultural contexts. This understanding becomes particularly important for a media organization that positions itself as a local news outlet with national reach.

Interview data reveal that Tribunnews conducted formative research to identify how regional audiences consume news and perceive the organization as a local media platform. Internal survey data collected in 2020 provided insights into audience segmentation, news consumption behavior, and untapped market potential across different regions. These findings enabled Tribunnews to evaluate its position within the local media landscape and informed the development of strategic communication initiatives.

The Chief Executive Officer emphasized that the organization's differentiation strategy emerged from the need to define a clear organizational purpose within a crowded digital media market. Rather than competing solely on speed or volume of content, Tribunnews sought to articulate a distinctive identity rooted in local perspectives:

“That differentiation strategy compels us to tell our potential customers, our readers, advertisers, and other stakeholders that Tribun has a different identity from the others. Why does Tribun need to exist? That's the purpose we're talking about purpose.” (Dahlan Dahi, Interview, October 18, 2024).

This strategic orientation led to the formulation of the tagline *“Mata Lokal Menjangkau Indonesia,”* which reflects Tribunnews' commitment to delivering locally grounded news while maintaining national relevance. The concept of “Local Perspective” serves as the core of the organization's public relations narrative, positioning Tribunnews as a media outlet that acknowledges Indonesia's cultural, geographic, and social diversity.

Further findings indicate that local journalists play a central role in implementing this strategy. By assigning reporters who are embedded within local communities, Tribunnews is able to produce content that reflects authentic regional perspectives. According to the CEO, this approach allows the organization to address local issues more accurately while strengthening audience trust:

“Diversity is triggered perhaps by our location, starting from the fact that we are spread across thousands of islands. That’s why Tribun has to establish regional offices. We make sure those offices are staffed by local reporters so they can speak from their own perspective, that’s what we call the Local Perspective.” (Dahlan Dahi, Interview, October 18, 2024).

While this differentiation strategy offers strategic advantages, the findings also highlight associated risks. Emphasizing local perspectives carries the potential risk of audience fragmentation and misinterpretation if content is not carefully managed. Informants noted that maintaining consistency in national identity while accommodating diverse regional narratives requires continuous monitoring and evaluation.

The CEO acknowledged that socio-cultural diversity can create sensitivities related to ethnicity, religion, and local values. As a result, Tribunnews exercises caution to ensure that its content does not provoke conflict or bias:

“Within the diversity we present, there is a risk of fragmentation or misinterpretation if not handled carefully. Considering Indonesia’s many different ethnic groups, religions, and cultures, Tribunnews must ensure that our approach does not create perceptions of bias or misinformation.” (Dahlan Dahi, Interview, October 18, 2024).

From a public relations perspective, these risks highlight the importance of formative research as a mechanism for balancing differentiation and coherence. While the emphasis on local perspectives strengthens audience relevance, it also requires strategic oversight to ensure that communication narratives remain aligned with the organization’s national identity. This balancing act positions public relations as a mediating function that translates diverse local realities into a coherent organizational image.

The findings suggest that Tribunnews does not treat situational risks as isolated problems but as interconnected strategic considerations. Audience fragmentation, socio-cultural sensitivity, and digital competition are addressed through continuous research and internal discussion rather than reactive messaging. This approach allows the organization to anticipate reputational vulnerabilities and design communication strategies that are both context-sensitive and institutionally consistent.

In line with Smith’s (2017) framework, these findings demonstrate that situation analysis at Tribunnews functions as a strategic process for identifying external

opportunities and constraints. Through formative research, the organization is able to anticipate risks, align its communication strategy with audience expectations, and reinforce its positioning as a credible local media outlet.

### ***Organizational Analysis: Internal Alignment and Communication Structure***

Organizational analysis findings reveal that internal alignment plays a critical role in supporting Tribunnews' public relations strategy. Rather than establishing a separate public relations department, Tribunnews integrates public relations functions within the Marketing Communication division. This structural arrangement reflects a strategic decision to centralize communication roles and ensure coherence between organizational values and communication practices.

The Chief Executive Officer explained that the Marketing Communication division was formed to manage corporate communication more systematically. Within this structure, public relations is understood as a strategic management function that operates across internal and external communication domains:

“Marketing Communication was formed to make our communication more systematic and well-organized. Its role is to communicate our values, vision, and purpose, both internally and externally.” (Dahlan Dahi, Interview, October 18, 2024).

Within this structure, the Marketing Communication team is responsible for translating organizational purpose into consistent communication narratives. The Marketing Communication Manager explained that internal alignment is achieved through integrated campaign planning and the use of shared communication guidelines:

“We design one umbrella campaign plan, supported by pillars such as local perspective. The communication, both visual and verbal must remain consistent across platforms.” (Aziz, Interview, October 17, 2024).

This internal coordination reflects an organizational understanding that public relations effectiveness depends on consistency across communication channels and organizational units. By establishing shared guidelines and an umbrella campaign framework, Tribunnews minimizes the risk of fragmented messaging across its extensive regional network.

From a formative research standpoint, organizational analysis at Tribunnews functions as a diagnostic process that assesses whether internal structures and communication roles are aligned with strategic objectives. The integration of

public relations within the Marketing Communication division enables research findings to inform decision-making processes more directly, reducing delays between analysis and action. This internal alignment strengthens the organization's capacity to respond strategically to external challenges identified during situation and public analyses.

From a formative research perspective, organizational analysis involves evaluating internal strengths, weaknesses, and communication capabilities. The findings suggest that Tribunnews' integrated structure supports more effective problem-solving by allowing communication teams to identify issues, assess organizational capacity, and design appropriate responses. This approach aligns with Smith's (2017) assertion that understanding internal organizational conditions is essential for developing credible and consistent public relations strategies.

### **Public Analysis: Audience Perception and Issue Monitoring**

Public analysis findings indicate that Tribunnews conducts continuous research to understand audience needs and public responses. The organization categorizes its publics based on their relationship with the media outlet, including readers, content producers, partners, and regulatory stakeholders. Among these groups, the general public is identified as the primary target audience.

Interview data reveal that Tribunnews adopts a hyperlocal strategy to address the diverse needs of regional audiences while maintaining national accessibility. According to one informant, audience targeting decisions are informed by survey data and audience research:

As explained by the Marketing Communication Manager:

“We listen and collect information. We do not counter or divert issues, because as a media organization, that approach is not appropriate for us.” (Aziz, Interview, October 17, 2024).

Similarly, the Marketing Communication Superintendent noted that the organization's objective is not to amplify positive sentiment, but to mitigate negative perception:

“We do not focus on increasing positive sentiment. Our priority is to reduce negative sentiment and move it toward neutral.” (Hamzah, Interview, October 14, 2024).

These findings indicate that public analysis at Tribunnews prioritizes issue mitigation and ethical responsibility over impression management. Rather than attempting to shape public opinion aggressively, the organization emphasizes accuracy, accountability, and responsiveness. This approach reflects an understanding that public trust in digital journalism is built through consistent editorial integrity rather than symbolic communication efforts.

By systematically monitoring audience sentiment and public discourse, Tribunnews is able to identify emerging issues that may affect organizational credibility. Formative research thus serves as an early warning system that informs communication decisions before issues escalate into reputational crises.

This strategy allows Tribunnews to deliver content that resonates with local audiences while fostering a sense of representation among readers from different regions. Public analysis also involves monitoring public reactions to content, enabling the organization to evaluate whether communication messages are well received or require adjustment.

The findings further indicate that Tribunnews places emphasis on building strong relationships with enablers such as local communities, advertisers, and government institutions. Through collaborative campaigns and partnerships, the organization seeks to strengthen its reputation and extend the reach of socially relevant content. At the same time, Tribunnews remains attentive to potential limiters, including competitors and regulatory constraints, by continuously monitoring market dynamics and compliance requirements.

In Smith's (2017) framework, public analysis serves to assess how publics perceive organizational communication and how relationships can be managed strategically. The findings suggest that Tribunnews applies this principle by using formative research to guide audience engagement, issue monitoring, and adaptive communication strategies.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that formative research at Tribunnews operates as an integrated and ongoing strategic process rather than a preliminary or procedural stage. Situation analysis, organizational analysis, and public analysis are not treated as separate activities, but are interconnected and continuously inform one another. Insights derived from external conditions, internal structures, and audience perceptions collectively shape public relations decision-making prior to the implementation of communication programs.

This integrated application of formative research positions public relations at Tribunnews as a strategic management function rather than a purely promotional activity. By embedding formative research within the Marketing Communication division, Tribunnews ensures that research-based insights are translated directly into strategic communication actions. In the context of digital news media, where credibility, visibility, and public trust are constantly negotiated, formative research functions as a critical mechanism for sustaining organizational legitimacy and audience engagement.

Overall, the findings indicate that formative research plays a strategic role in shaping public relations planning at Tribunnews. The empirical evidence indicates that situation analysis enables the organization to identify strategic challenges related to market competition and Indonesia's social diversity, while organizational analysis ensures internal alignment between institutional values, organizational structure, and communication practices. Public analysis further allows Tribunnews to systematically monitor audience perceptions and respond to emerging issues through ethical and research-based communication approaches.

By integrating public relations functions within the Marketing Communication division, Tribunnews ensures that insights generated through formative research are directly translated into strategic communication actions. This integrated structure reflects contemporary public relations practices in which public relations roles are embedded within broader strategic communication units rather than operating as isolated functions (Smith, 2017). In the context of digital news media, such integration is particularly important given the high visibility, rapid information flow, and reputational risks inherent in online journalism.

These findings reinforce the relevance of Smith's formative research framework for analyzing public relations strategies within media organizations. More importantly, the study highlights the critical role of research-based communication planning in sustaining credibility, managing public perception, and strengthening audience engagement in the digital media landscape.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study examined how formative research is applied as part of the public relations strategy of Tribunnews within the context of digital news media. Focusing exclusively on Phase 1 of Ronald D. Smith's strategic public relations framework, the study explored how situation analysis, organizational analysis, and public analysis function as a strategic foundation for communication planning rather than as preliminary or procedural steps. By adopting a qualitative case study approach, this research provides an in-depth understanding of how

formative research is embedded within organizational practices and decision-making processes in a local digital media organization.

The findings demonstrate that formative research at Tribunnews plays a central role in identifying and interpreting strategic challenges arising from a highly competitive and fragmented media environment. Through situation analysis, Tribunnews is able to recognize external pressures related to market competition, audience fragmentation, and Indonesia's socio-cultural diversity. Rather than treating these conditions as isolated problems, the organization approaches them as interconnected strategic considerations that require careful interpretation and continuous monitoring. This approach enables Tribunnews to position local perspectives as a core organizational value while remaining attentive to potential reputational risks.

Organizational analysis further reveals that public relations functions at Tribunnews are institutionally integrated within the Marketing Communication division rather than structured as a standalone department. This integration allows formative research insights to be directly translated into strategic communication decisions without bureaucratic separation between research and implementation. The involvement of senior management in communication planning reinforces the strategic role of public relations as a management function that aligns organizational purpose, internal coordination, and external messaging. In this context, formative research supports organizational coherence by ensuring that communication practices are grounded in shared values and strategic objectives.

Public analysis findings indicate that Tribunnews emphasizes ethical responsibility and issue mitigation in managing relationships with its audiences. Rather than focusing on impression management or reactive communication, the organization prioritizes continuous monitoring of audience perceptions and emerging issues. This approach reflects an understanding that public trust in digital journalism is built through consistent editorial integrity and responsible communication practices. Formative research thus functions as an early warning mechanism that informs communication decisions before issues escalate into reputational challenges.

Taken together, these findings highlight formative research as an ongoing strategic process rather than a one-time preparatory activity. Situation, organizational, and public analyses are interrelated and continuously inform one another, enabling Tribunnews to adapt its communication strategy to changing environmental and audience conditions. This integrated application of formative

research underscores the importance of research-based decision-making in sustaining credibility, audience engagement, and organizational legitimacy in the digital media landscape.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to public relations scholarship by extending the empirical application of Ronald D. Smith's formative research framework to the context of local digital journalism. While formative research has been widely discussed in strategic public relations literature, empirical studies examining its application within media organizations—particularly local digital media—remain limited. By focusing on formative research as an analytical entry point, this study demonstrates how strategic public relations frameworks can be used to examine communication processes within news organizations beyond content production and audience metrics.

Practically, the findings offer insights for media practitioners and communication professionals on the importance of embedding public relations functions within strategic communication structures. For local media organizations operating in digital environments, formative research provides a systematic approach to understanding audience needs, organizational capacities, and environmental challenges before implementing communication programs. The case of Tribunnews illustrates how integrating public relations within the Marketing Communication division can facilitate closer alignment between research insights and strategic action.

This study also highlights the relevance of formative research for organizations operating in socio-culturally diverse contexts. In environments characterized by regional diversity and complex audience dynamics, formative research enables organizations to navigate differentiation strategies while maintaining coherence and ethical responsibility. By grounding communication decisions in systematic analysis, organizations can mitigate reputational risks and foster long-term trust among their publics.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. As a single case study, the findings are context-specific and not intended for statistical generalization. Additionally, the study focuses exclusively on the formative research phase and does not examine subsequent stages of strategic public relations planning, such as strategy implementation and evaluation. Future research may address these limitations by examining other phases of the strategic public relations process or by conducting comparative studies across different media organizations.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that formative research constitutes a critical strategic foundation for public relations planning within digital news media organizations. By embedding formative research within organizational routines and decision-making processes, Tribunnews illustrates how research-based communication planning can support credibility, audience engagement, and organizational legitimacy in an increasingly dynamic and visible media environment.

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