

Beyond symmetry: Hybrid and negotiated communication in bureaucratic reform of public sector organizations

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ABSTRACT

Bureaucratic reform in the public sector frequently positions organizational communication as a mere administrative instrument, while its dialogic dimensions remain empirically underexplored. Evidence from Indonesian licensing services indicates that civil servants' communicative behavior directly predicts citizen satisfaction outcomes, yet the mechanisms underlying this relationship are rarely examined at the regional technical agency level. This study analyzes how organizational communication operates in the implementation of the Integrity Zone at the Marine and Fisheries Branch Office of Tuban Regency, critically examining the normative assumptions of the Two-Way Symmetrical Model within a hierarchical bureaucratic context. A qualitative case study design was employed, grounded in a social constructivist paradigm, which holds that communicative meanings and organizational practices are socially constructed and negotiated through actors' interactions within institutional contexts. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with five informants across leadership, managerial, operational, and external stakeholder positions, supplemented by participant observation and documentary analysis of Government Institution Performance Reports (Laporan Kinerja Instansi Pemerintah/LKjIP), service Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and Community Satisfaction Survey (Survei Kepuasan Masyarakat/SKM) data. Data were analyzed using the interactive model. Findings reveal four principal communicative patterns: relational internal communication functioning as a compensatory mechanism against structural rigidity; multichannel engagement and meaning adaptation contingent on regulatory stability; negotiated public communication documented through a Community Satisfaction Index (Indeks Kepuasan Masyarakat/IKM) trajectory from Converted Interval Score (Nilai Interval Konversi/NIK) 88.82 in 2020 to NIK 97.06 in 2025; and structural constraints that bound dialogic intent within hierarchical incentive systems. This study proposes two theoretical concepts, Hybrid Symmetrical Communication and Negotiated Public Communication, as empirical evidence suggesting possible extensions of Excellence Theory, offering a contextually grounded framework for understanding public sector communication as a dynamic, adaptive practice in non-Western hierarchical settings.

Keywords: *organizational communication; hybrid symmetrical communication; negotiated public communication; bureaucratic reform; public sector communication.*

INTRODUCTION

Governance quality has become a strategic priority for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), demanding a paradigm shift from the efficiency-oriented logic of New Public Management toward more mission-oriented and collaborative frameworks (Meuleman, 2021). This shift requires not only structural change within bureaucracies but also a fundamental transformation in how public organizations communicate, both internally and externally. Evidence from Indonesian local government agencies indicates that this communicative dimension carries measurable consequences: civil servants' communicative behavior directly predicts citizen satisfaction in licensing services, with organizations where staff communicate clearly

and relationally achieving significantly higher satisfaction scores than those relying on procedural information transfer alone (Pribadi & Kim, 2022). Across developing-country contexts, public service failure is frequently attributed not to technical incapacity but to communication breakdowns: inter-unit miscommunication, ambiguous policy messages, and inadequate public engagement in decision-making (Pathony et al., 2025; Wijayanti et al., 2025). Reform failures are persistently linked to overlapping authority, informational misalignment across bureaucratic levels, and insufficient participatory communication management at the regional level (Salomo & Rahmayanti, 2023; Mansoor, 2021). Despite this evidence, organizational communication scholarship has not adequately theorized how dialogic ideals operate within the specific institutional conditions of regional technical bureaucracies in non-Western hierarchical settings.

Within this context, organizational communication emerges as a decisive factor in determining bureaucratic reform success. Reform cannot be understood solely as institutional restructuring or procedural simplification; it constitutes a process of organizational cultural transformation requiring openness, participation, and sustained dialogue. Prasodjo (2025) demonstrates that bureaucratic transformation in the digital era necessitates fundamental changes in communication patterns and inter-unit relationships. Men and Stacks (2014) show that authentic leadership communication directly shapes strategic internal communication quality and organization-employee relationship strength. Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) establish dialogic communication as the field's principal normative extension of Grunig's symmetrical model, identifying five features of dialogic practice: mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment. Communication thus functions as a strategic mechanism for building policy legitimacy, public trust, and service effectiveness (Zamzami, 2021).

In Indonesia, bureaucratic reform has been a national strategic agenda for well over a decade. The development of Integrity Zones represents the government's most concrete mechanism for realizing corruption-free territories and a clean-serving bureaucracy, with empirical assessments documenting its implementation challenges across provincial contexts (Adiananto et al., 2024; Sugiyanti & Mustofa, 2025). The marine and fisheries sector presents these challenges with particular acuity. Its multistakeholder character, encompassing traditional fishermen, business operators, and regional government units, makes communication a crucial determinant of successful policy implementation. The Marine and Fisheries Branch Office of Tuban Regency occupies a structurally unique intermediary position, bridging provincial government policies with the needs of coastal communities. LKjIP data confirm that programmatic success depends not only on technical execution but on organizational communication effectiveness in disseminating information, building coordination, and managing community relations. Gerungan et al. (2024) demonstrate that complex fisheries policies encounter persistent communicative barriers when reaching traditional fishing communities, underscoring the systemic nature of these challenges across bureaucratic scales. Field evidence reveals a persistent communication gap in licensing services, conservation guidance, and new regulation implementation: service recipients cite insufficient information clarity and frequently changing procedures, while the organization faces suboptimal cross-sectional coordination and sectoral ego, a pattern that Rohayatin et al. (2022) confirm as systemic in Indonesian bureaucratic communication models.

The most relevant theoretical framework for examining this phenomenon is the

Two-Way Symmetrical Model developed by Grunig, which emphasizes dialogic, participatory communication oriented toward achieving mutual interests between an organization and its publics (Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The model positions symmetrical communication as the ethical ideal for public relations (PR) practice. Grunig (2013) acknowledges that contextual factors, including hierarchy and institutional authority, constrain the model's application but maintains its normative value. Pandey and Garnett (2006) demonstrate that public sector communication performance depends significantly on organizational capacity to create responsive information flows. Madan and Ashok (2022) argue that two-way communication in public organizations is a prerequisite for sustainable reform. Kent and Taylor (1998) extend this framework through dialogic theory, and Kent and Taylor (2002) further clarify the philosophical foundations and organizational implications of dialogue. Coombs and Holladay (2010) situate these principles within strategic communication management. The postmodern and critical perspectives now prominent in PR scholarship are directly relevant here: the field's shift away from functionalist assumptions toward power-sensitive, relational frameworks provides the theoretical space in which this study's contributions can be most productively situated.

The Two-Way Symmetrical Model has attracted sustained and substantive criticism, particularly from postmodern and critical communication scholarship. Holtzhausen (2000) challenges its functionalist underpinnings from a postmodern standpoint, arguing that the model's emphasis on balance and consensus suppresses dissent and serves dominant organizational interests rather than enabling genuine dialogue. Heath et al. (2009) document the field's rhetorical and critical turn, demonstrating that organizational communication cannot be understood outside the power structures in which it operates. L'Etang et al. (2015) consolidate this critical PR scholarship, showing that symmetrical ideals are routinely compromised by institutional authority, ideological control, and relational asymmetry. Van Ruler and De Lange (2003) provide empirical evidence from a large-scale survey of Dutch organizations, demonstrating that structural and hierarchical barriers persistently prevent strategic communication management from being practiced even when communication units hold formally senior positions. Analyses of government PR in Indonesia further confirm that the gap between Excellence Theory's normative expectations and actual bureaucratic communicative behavior remains significant (Alodia & Putri, 2025). This study retains the Two-Way Symmetrical Model as a normative reference point rather than replacing it: the critical tension between symmetrical ideals and institutional realities is precisely the analytical problem this study addresses, a tension that postmodern and critical PR scholarship has identified as endemic to the field.

This study addresses three specific research gaps. First, empirical studies examining organizational communication in regional technical agencies in the marine and fisheries sector within the context of Integrity Zone implementation remain limited. Second, the relationships among organizational communication, policy communication, and performance communication in Indonesian public service contexts remain inadequately theorized. Third, LKjIP documents, which serve as concrete artifacts of bureaucratic performance communication, have rarely been used as primary data sources in organizational communication analysis. This study is guided by the following research question: How is organizational communication operationalized during Integrity Zone implementation within a hierarchical bureaucracy at the Marine and

Fisheries Branch Office of Tuban Regency, and how does this challenge the normative assumptions of Excellence Theory?

The novelty of this study lies in two theoretical concepts developed from empirical evidence. Hybrid Symmetrical Communication (HSC) reconceptualizes symmetrical communication as a bounded, contextually negotiated practice that integrates dialogic principles with hierarchical constraints. It is theoretically distinct from the Two-Way Symmetrical Model in that it does not posit equal power or unconstrained dialogue as preconditions; rather, it theorizes how dialogic intent operates within structural authority asymmetries, producing bounded symmetry that is leader-dependent rather than systemically designed. It is likewise distinct from Asymmetrical Models in that dialogic intent is genuine rather than suppressed — the asymmetry is structural rather than motivational. Negotiated Public Communication (NPC) repositions organization-public interaction as an ongoing negotiation of meaning and legitimacy within institutional power asymmetries. It is theoretically distinct from conventional service communication models in that it frames this interaction not as a transactional encounter but as a political and relational process in which both parties negotiate expectations, authority limits, and trust. These concepts engage directly with the postmodern and critical PR tradition's concern with power, context, and institutional constraint, while remaining in productive dialogue with Excellence Theory. This study provides empirical evidence suggesting possible extensions of Excellence Theory, with findings appropriately bounded by their single-case qualitative design.

METHOD

This study is grounded in a social constructivist paradigm, which holds that communicative meanings and organizational practices are not fixed but are socially constructed, negotiated, and reproduced through actors' interactions within institutional contexts (Creswell, 2017). This paradigmatic orientation is consistent with the study's focus on how communicative practices are shaped by, and in turn reproduce, relational dynamics, hierarchical structures, and institutional constraints within a specific organizational setting. A qualitative case study design was adopted to obtain a comprehensive understanding of organizational communication dynamics in public service delivery at the Marine and Fisheries Branch Office of Tuban Regency. The qualitative approach captures meaning, subjective experience, and social interaction that cannot be reduced to numerical data, making it particularly suited to examining communicative phenomena in bureaucracies that are inherently complex and contextual. The case study design enables holistic exploration within a specific organizational setting, attending to the interplay between formal institutional structures and informal communicative practices. The Marine and Fisheries Branch Office of Tuban Regency was selected purposively because it occupies a structurally unique intermediary position between complex bureaucratic regulatory frameworks and the socio-cultural communication patterns of coastal fishing communities, creating communicative tensions that are particularly suited to examining the applicability and limits of two-way symmetrical communication in hierarchical public sector contexts. The organization's active participation in the Integrity Zone development program further strengthens the site's relevance: Integrity Zone (Zona Integritas/ZI) implementation constitutes a government-mandated mechanism through which organizational communication is formally restructured and evaluated in real time

(Adiananto et al., 2024). Fieldwork was conducted over two months, from November to December 2025, a period deliberately selected because it coincided with the Integrity Zone's critical evaluation phase, enabling observation of communicative practices at their most organizationally consequential moment. The researcher was present on-site throughout this period, attending formal coordination meetings, morning roll calls, and service counter interactions, as well as informal communicative spaces.

Five informants were purposively selected across three organizational levels and one external stakeholder position, as shown in Table 1. I-5 was not selected as a randomly chosen individual fisherman but as the chairman of the fishermen's association operating within the service territory of the Marine and Fisheries Branch Office of Tuban Regency. In qualitative research, community leaders and key figures are recognized as informants who carry representative collective knowledge of their community's experiences rather than merely their individual perspective (Creswell, 2017; Morse, 2015). As association chairman, I-5 regularly consolidates and articulates the communicative experiences of member fishermen with the agency, providing an institutionally grounded external perspective rather than a purely personal one. I-5's account is further triangulated with SKM documentary data recording satisfaction ratings from 598 respondents in 2025 and 504 in 2024, further strengthening the external perspective. Data were collected through three complementary methods: in-depth interviews using a semi-structured guide; participant observation focusing on naturally occurring communicative interactions in both formal and informal settings; and documentary analysis of LKjIP, service SOPs, and SKM reports, treated as artifacts of performance communication rather than purely factual records. The convergence of these three methods enabled robust methodological triangulation (Valentini, 2018).

Table 1. Research Informant Profile

Code	Position	Category	Rationale
I-1	Head, Marine and Fisheries Branch Office	Internal: Leadership	Primary decision-maker; directly responsible for Integrity Zone implementation and organizational communication strategy.
I-2	Head, General Administration Sub-Section	Internal: Managerial	Key coordinator of inter-unit information flows and administrative communication processes.
I-3	Public Service Officer, Licensing Verification	Internal: Operational	Front-line service communicator; daily engagement with external stakeholders at the direct public interface.
I-4	Public Service Officer, Marine Conservation	Internal: Operational	Enables cross-verification of front-line communicative practices and service interaction dynamics.
I-5	Chairman, Fishermen's Association, Marine and Fisheries Branch Office of Tuban Regency Service Territory	External: Community	Selected as a community leader whose position consolidates the collective communicative experiences of member fishermen with the agency; provides an institutionally grounded rather than purely individual external perspective.

Source: Author (2026)

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), encompassing data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Raw data were open-coded to identify recurring patterns, then refined through axial coding to examine relationships among themes. To ensure trustworthiness, the study implemented source and methodological triangulation, member checking with key informants (I-1 and I-5), and comprehensive audit trail documentation throughout the research process, consistent with the criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability in qualitative inquiry (Lim, 2024; Morse, 2015).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Organizational communication at the Marine and Fisheries Branch Office of Tuban Regency does not operate as a linear administrative system. Rather, it develops as a dynamic, relational, and contextual social practice. Evidence from five informants across leadership, managerial, operational, and external stakeholder positions demonstrates that communicative effectiveness is shaped not only by formal organizational structures but by actors' capacity to negotiate meaning, manage relational dynamics, and adapt communicative strategies. Communication patterns exist on a negotiated spectrum that shifts situationally, ranging from more symmetrical to more asymmetrical depending on context. SKM documentary data provide an independent empirical layer corroborating these patterns at the aggregate level. These findings are organized into four interrelated themes, summarized in Table 2, followed by integrated theoretical discussion for each theme.

Table 2. Summary of Principal Themes and Theoretical Implications

Theme	Key Informants	Core Communicative Pattern	Theoretical Implication
Relational Internal Communication as Structural Compensation	I-1, I-2, I-3	Interpersonal proximity and consultative leadership substitute for formal hierarchical coordination. Relational bonds precede and enable communicative alignment. Participatory decision-making produces measurable organizational culture change.	Dialogic intent operates within bounded hierarchical authority. Symmetry is leader-dependent, not systemically designed. Extends Men and Stacks (2014). Supports Hybrid Symmetrical Communication.
Multichannel Engagement and Meaning Adaptation	I-1, I-2, I-4, I-5	Messages are reconstructed in simplified, culturally accessible language across formal meetings, WhatsApp groups, field visits, and social media. Effectiveness is contingent on regulatory stability.	Meaning reconstruction reflects adaptive communicative agency. Policy instability limits symmetry. Consistent with dialogic principles of mutuality and propinquity (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002).
Emergence of Negotiated Public Communication	I-3, I-5, External Community Member	External dialogue is reciprocal but jurisdictionally bounded. Public trust builds through transparent navigation of institutional limits. SKM data show an IKM trajectory from NIK 88.82 (2020) to NIK 97.06 (2025).	Organization-public interaction constitutes ongoing negotiation of meaning and legitimacy within power asymmetry. SKM data provide documentary corroboration. Extends Valentini (2018) and Mansoor (2021). Supports Negotiated Public Communication.
Structural Constraints and Bounded Symmetry	I-1, I-2, I-4	Sectoral ego, misaligned performance incentives, and limited public administrative literacy systematically constrain dialogic intent. Leadership frames constraints as natural human diversity to preserve the relational communicative climate.	Structural barriers to communication management persist in hierarchical organizations (Van Ruler & De Lange, 2003). Symmetry is bounded rather than absent. Challenges Excellence Theory's normative idealism (Holtzhausen, 2000; L'Etang et al., 2015).

Source: Author (2026)

Figure 1 situates these four themes within the broader theoretical framework of the study, tracing the argumentative arc from the normative foundation of Excellence Theory through postmodern and critical scholarship that motivates this inquiry, to the two theoretical concepts that the empirical findings generate.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: Beyond Symmetry in Public Sector Organizational Communication				
NORMATIVE FOUNDATION (Excellence Theory / Two-Way Symmetrical Model)				
Grunig & Dozier (2002); Grunig & Hunt (1984); Kent & Taylor (1998, 2002)				
↓ Critiqued by postmodern & critical PR scholarship ↓				
Holtzhausen (2000) Postmodern critique: consensus suppresses dissent	Heath et al. (2009) Rhetorical & critical turn: power structures matter	L'Etang et al. (2015) Symmetrical ideals routinely compromised	Van Ruler & De Lange (2003) Structural barriers persist empirically	Alodia & Putri (2025) Gap confirmed in Indonesian context
↓ Empirically grounded in: Marine and Fisheries Branch Office of Tuban Regency — Integrity Zone Implementation ↓				
FOUR EMPIRICAL THEMES (Results)				
Theme 1 Relational Internal Communication as Structural Compensation [I-1, I-2, I-3]	Theme 2 Multichannel Engagement & Meaning Adaptation [I-1, I-2, I-4, I-5]	Theme 3 Emergence of Negotiated Public Communication [I-3, I-5, Community Member]	Theme 4 Structural Constraints & Bounded Symmetry [I-1, I-2, I-4]	SKM Data IKM NIK 88.82→97.06 (2020–2025) Documentary corroboration
↓ Generate two novel theoretical concepts ↓				
TWO THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS (Empirical Evidence Suggesting Possible Extensions of Excellence Theory)				
HYBRID SYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATION Dialogic principles + Hierarchical constraints = Bounded Symmetry. Symmetry is contextually negotiated, not binary Leader-dependent; adaptive; institutional compensatory Extends: Kent & Taylor (1998, 2002); Men & Stacks (2014)		—	NEGOTIATED PUBLIC COMMUNICATION Organization–public dialogue = ongoing legitimacy negotiation. Reciprocal but jurisdictionally bounded Trust through transparent navigation of limits Extends: Valentini (2018); Mansoor (2021); Li & Lin (2023)	
Distinct from existing models: Unlike the pure Two-Way Symmetrical Model (equal power, full dialogue) and the Asymmetrical Model (one-way dominance), HSC occupies an institutionally bounded middle ground where dialogic intent is genuine but structurally constrained.			Distinct from existing models: Unlike transaction-based service communication models, NPC frames organization–public interaction as an ongoing political and relational negotiation, not a service encounter. Power asymmetry is acknowledged, not concealed.	
IMPLICATION: Public sector communication operates as a hybrid, adaptive, and negotiated social practice — not as the application of a normative model				

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework: Beyond Symmetry in Public Sector Organizational Communication (Source: Author, 2026)

The four themes are elaborated in the following sections, with integrated theoretical discussion presented within each theme.

Relational Internal Communication as Structural Compensation

Internal communication has evolved beyond rigid hierarchical patterns into relational communication grounded in interpersonal proximity, mutual trust, and inclusive leadership. Organizational leaders create fluid communicative spaces through personal approaches, informal dialogue, and the reinforcement of collective solidarity. The Head of the Branch Office (I-1) articulated this orientation explicitly:

“My first strategy is maintaining good relationships: maintaining cohesion, a sense of family, togetherness. Because with good relationships, effective and efficient communication will naturally follow. It becomes easier to get a positive response from colleagues. (I-1)”

This reflects a deliberate leadership choice to prioritize relational bonds as the primary mechanism for communicative alignment, rather than relying solely on formal hierarchical authority. The consultative orientation extends into decision-making practice:

“I do not immediately make decisions. I first throw out the idea: I present it to the team, see if there are objections or additional inputs. When the team has responded and even contributed suggestions, then I make it into a collective decision. (I-1)”

From the managerial level, I-2 confirmed that these dynamics produced measurable organizational culture change: “Before the Integrity Zone, there was no transparency. Individual ego was still high. Now, after its implementation, performance is discussed collectively, and satisfaction surveys are already in place.” At the operational level, I-3 corroborated this trajectory: “Since the implementation of ZI, leadership has become more open to receiving input from staff, through performance dialogues as well as joint meetings.”

These findings reveal that symmetrical communication in this context emerges as an adaptive practice contingent on individual relational capacity, particularly that of leadership, rather than as a deliberately designed systemic feature. It functions as a compensatory mechanism against structural rigidity (Kim, 2021; Men & Stacks, 2014). What existing theory did not fully anticipate is that relational bonds function not merely as a complement to hierarchical authority but as its primary operative substitute: I-1 builds communicative alignment through interpersonal trust before invoking formal authority, reversing the sequence that hierarchical models assume. This extends Men and Stacks’ (2014) argument about authentic leadership communication by demonstrating that, in non-Western bureaucratic contexts, the relational dimension is not a stylistic preference but a structural compensatory mechanism generated by the inadequacy of formal channels. It also extends Kent and Taylor’s (1998, 2002) dialogic theory by showing that mutuality, empathy, and dialogic risk operate not in spite of hierarchical constraint but within it: the leader creates a bounded dialogic space precisely because the wider institutional structure does not. HSC is thus theoretically

distinct from the pure Two-Way Symmetrical Model: it does not require equal power or unconstrained dialogue; it theorizes symmetry as a bounded, contextually achieved practice rather than a normative standard. Perkasa and Aditia (2023) position leadership communication as a deliberate contextually adaptive strategy, and the findings confirm this. Furthermore, I-1's framing of structural constraints as natural human diversity serves an additional function: it sustains the relational communicative climate against the cognitive dissonance produced by the gap between symmetrical ideals and asymmetrical realities, a function Yue et al. (2019) associate with transformational leadership's capacity to maintain communicative openness under organizational uncertainty.

Multichannel Engagement and Meaning Adaptation

The organization has adopted a multichannel engagement strategy that integrates formal communication channels with digital platforms, enabling rapid and simultaneous information distribution across diverse actor groups. I-1 described this approach:

"Internally, we communicate through internal discussion meetings, WhatsApp groups, morning roll calls, and we also display written materials with an Integrity Zone atmosphere throughout the office. Externally, we have social media: Instagram, the agency's website, and we bring banners to every public event. When we conduct field visits to verify business licenses, we also convey the ZI spirit and make clear that our verification visits are free of charge. (I-1)"

I-2 elaborated: "We hold joint meetings weekly on Mondays and evaluation meetings on Fridays. We also use social media, display banners reflecting the Integrity Zone spirit on office walls, and publish articles on the agency's official website." Beyond the structural dimension of multichannel deployment, the more theoretically significant finding concerns language adaptation: the deliberate simplification of technically complex policy messages to align with recipients' communicative context. I-4 described this practice:

"I explain licensing procedures step by step in simple, easy-to-understand language. I provide applicants with information about document requirements, the process flow, and estimated completion times to prevent misunderstandings. (I-4)"

This adaptation was confirmed effective by I-5: "Yes, the officers provide explanations that are easy to understand." Yet the same informant identified a critical constraint: "The licensing information is clear enough, but rule changes occur very frequently, which confuses fishermen." Meaning reconstruction remains contingent on regulatory stability; when that stability is absent, adaptive communicative effort is partially undermined (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021). This finding is consistent with Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) dialogic principles of mutuality and propinquity, given that the organization actively adapts its communicative forms to meet stakeholders where they are — but reveals the structural limits of such adaptation when the regulatory environment itself is in flux.

Emergence of Negotiated Public Communication

Organization-public communication does not operate as one-way information transmission. It involves reciprocal, dialogic interaction characterized by feedback mechanisms, responsive service practices, and consultative engagement. Unlike internal communicative dynamics, this external dimension is shaped by a fundamentally different set of relational conditions, specifically those in which the organization must actively negotiate its institutional authority against the diverse expectations of a heterogeneous public.

Participatory channels were confirmed to exist by I-5: "A space to submit complaints and suggestions is available." The existence of such channels alone does not constitute evidence of symmetrical communication. More significant is the extent to which they function as genuinely dialogic mechanisms. A community member's account offers a more substantively revealing picture:

"We were invited to a meeting before the new regulation was implemented. We gave our input and some of it was considered. We felt heard, even though not everything we suggested was adopted. (External Community Member)"

This account encapsulates the essential tension of NPC: genuine consultative commitment coexists with concentrated institutional decision-making authority. I-3 described the operational boundary of this dialogue: "Sometimes service recipients complain about matters outside our authority. In such cases, we explain according to the existing SOPs while providing the best assistance we can."

The organization neither dismisses complaints outside its authority nor claims authority it does not possess. This communicative posture builds trust not by expanding organizational authority but by demonstrating integrity within its existing limits. This finding extends Li and Lin's (2023) grounded theory analysis of community-based organizational communication, which demonstrates that organizations managing technically complex policies with culturally specific communities must develop adaptive, participatory communication mechanisms. Those dynamic maps precisely onto the communicative challenges of this study's coastal fishing community context.

The cumulative trajectory of these communicative practices is documented in the SKM data reported in the LKjIP. The IKM of the Marine and Fisheries Branch Office of Tuban Regency shows consistent improvement: NIK 88.82 (mutu A, Sangat Baik/Very Good) in 2020 with 80 respondents, rising to NIK 94.70 in 2024 with 504 respondents, and reaching NIK 97.06 in 2025 with 598 respondents. The temporary decline to NIK 85.58 (mutu B, Baik/Good) in 2022, coinciding with a period of intensified regulatory change and increased respondent participation (260 respondents), is analytically significant: it demonstrates that communicative effectiveness is not a linear achievement but a negotiated and adaptive process sensitive to institutional and regulatory disruption. I-5's direct assessment confirms the recovery: "Service quality has improved compared to previous years. The process is more transparent and faster. My level of trust in the Branch Office's services is currently very good."

This positive evaluation affirms that feedback mechanisms have functioned as effective instruments for building public trust and enhancing service responsiveness, outcomes consistent with two-way communication models (Grunig & Jaatinen, 1999; Pandey & Garnett, 2006). Crucially, however, this trajectory does not

reflect a fully symmetrical process. Public feedback is selectively received, institutionally filtered, and strategically acted upon: dialogic in orientation but asymmetric in structure. This structural asymmetry is most visible at the operational interface, where the boundary conditions of organizational jurisdiction set the outer limit of dialogic exchange, and the integrity with which those limits are communicated becomes the primary mechanism through which public trust is sustained and renewed. The IKM trajectory, documented through Van Ruler and De Lange's (2003) insight that structural disruptions to communication effectiveness are real, measurable, and recoverable through adaptive communicative practice, provides the empirical foundation for NPC as a longitudinally constituted organizational achievement. NPC is thus theoretically distinct from conventional service communication models: it frames organization-public interaction as an ongoing political and relational negotiation rather than a transactional service encounter, with power asymmetry acknowledged and navigated rather than concealed or idealized. This extends Valentini's (2018) characterization of public sector communication as inherently political, relational, and value-laden, and connects to Mansoor's (2021) finding that trust depends not on the absence of institutional limits but on the integrity with which those limits are communicated.

Structural Constraints and Bounded Symmetry

Despite the presence of dialogic communicative practices, significant structural barriers constrain fully symmetrical communication. The most persistent barrier is sectoral ego, defined here as the tendency of individual organizational units to prioritize their own work domains over collective coordination. I-2 articulated this directly:

"The barriers that often arise are sectoral ego within each section or among staff themselves: still thinking 'if it is not mine, I am not capable,' or 'this is my section's result.' Then there are sections that are still busy with their own field performance targets, so when meetings or evaluations are scheduled, they keep being postponed. (I-2)"

I-1 acknowledged the human resource dimension, framing it as natural complexity: "Each person has their own strengths and weaknesses: in understanding, in responding, in creativity, in expressing ideas. Some engage readily in discussion; others simply follow along. That is not a negative thing: it is the nature of diversity." From the service delivery perspective, I-4 identified limited public administrative literacy as a recurring structural barrier: "The most frequent obstacle is insufficient public understanding of administrative requirements and incomplete documents, which extends the service process."

These findings demonstrate that communicative practices are more accurately understood as bounded symmetry: communication that contains dialogic elements and relational intentions but operates within the constraints of hierarchical systems and institutional control (Van Ruler & De Lange, 2003). This extends Van Ruler and De Lange's finding about barriers to communication management in hierarchical organizations by situating it within a non-Western regional public bureaucracy context. Van Ruler and De Lange showed that structural position alone does not guarantee

strategic communication practice; this study reveals specifically which mechanisms reproduce that barrier at the operational level: sectoral ego, misaligned performance incentives, and limited public administrative literacy. These are not random or individual failures but systemic features of the bureaucratic incentive structure that individual actors' dialogic intentions cannot overcome alone. This challenges Excellence Theory's implicit assumption that organizational commitment to symmetrical communication can be achieved through leadership orientation without simultaneously addressing the structural incentive systems that systematically undermine it.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes three explicit theoretical implications to organizational communication scholarship. First, symmetrical communication is not a binary condition but a contextually negotiated spectrum. The binary between symmetrical and asymmetrical communication, which is foundational to Excellence Theory (Grunig & Dozier, 2002), does not adequately capture how communication operates in hierarchical institutions. HSC offers a more precise analytical category for this spectrum, one that theorizes bounded symmetry as an institutionally achieved rather than normatively prescribed condition. Second, HSC extends Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) dialogic theory by demonstrating how dialogic principles, specifically mutuality, empathy, and relational commitment, are operationalized under hierarchical constraint rather than in spite of it. This moves dialogic theory from an ideal framework toward an institutionally grounded one applicable to non-Western public sector settings. Third, NPC bridges organizational communication and political communication scholarship by positioning organization-public interaction as a site of ongoing legitimacy negotiation rather than a service encounter, extending Valentini (2018) and connecting to broader concerns with institutional trust in political communication (Mansoor, 2021). The before-and-after contrast offered by I-2 and confirmed by I-5, from high individual ego and opacity to collective performance discussions and institutionalized satisfaction surveys, demonstrates that HSC and NPC are not static phenomena but temporally constituted organizational achievements. This study provides empirical evidence suggesting possible extensions of Excellence Theory, with the understanding that these findings are appropriately bounded by the single-case qualitative design and await confirmation through comparative and longitudinal research.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that organizational communication in public sector bureaucracies cannot be adequately explained through the normative assumptions of Two-Way Symmetrical Communication as proposed in Excellence Theory. Communication emerges as a context-dependent, adaptive, and negotiated practice shaped by the interplay of institutional structures, relational dynamics, and stakeholder interactions. SKM data documenting an IKM improvement from NIK 88.82 in 2020 to NIK 97.06 in 2025, including a mid-period dip during regulatory disruption, provide documentary corroboration that these communicative practices are developmental and adaptive rather than linear or mechanically applied.

Two interrelated theoretical contributions follow, offering empirical evidence that may extend Excellence Theory. HSC reconceptualizes organizational communication as a bounded, context-sensitive practice that integrates dialogic engagement with hierarchical control, theoretically distinct from existing models in its treatment of bounded symmetry as an institutionally achieved rather than normatively prescribed condition. NPC captures the interactive yet constrained nature of organization-public interaction, framing communication as an ongoing negotiation of meaning, expectations, and legitimacy that operates within existing power asymmetries rather than against them, theoretically distinct from service communication models in its acknowledgment of institutional power as constitutive rather than incidental. Together, these concepts engage productively with postmodern and critical PR scholarship and bring dialogic communication theory into contact with the institutional realities that critical scholarship has documented, offering an analytical framework grounded in non-Western hierarchical public sector conditions.

For practice, public sector organizations should move away from pursuing idealized symmetrical communication and instead build adaptive strategies that meaningfully balance institutional control with participatory engagement. This means strengthening relational communication internally, optimizing multichannel outreach strategies, and designing feedback mechanisms that are substantively integrated into decision-making rather than merely performative. Leadership development that prioritizes relational and dialogic communicative competencies constitutes a structural institutional investment, particularly for technical agencies at the direct public interface. This study is not without limitations. As a single qualitative case study conducted over two months, its findings are context-specific and temporally bounded. Future research should test and refine the proposed concepts across diverse organizational and cultural settings through comparative and mixed-method designs. Longitudinal approaches are particularly valuable for tracing how HSC and NPC practices evolve across bureaucratic reform phases, regulatory shifts, and changing public expectations.

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