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Environmental Crisis and Legitimacy Struggle: A Discourse Network Analysis in the Prabumulih Oil Spill Case

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Abstract

This study seeks to comprehend the legitimacy dynamics of various actors involved in the oil pipeline spill case in Sungai Kelekar, Prabumulih City. A dataset consisting of 132 online media articles curated into 36 pertinent news stories was analyzed using the discourse network analysis method. The results of this study indicate that the community plays a crucial role as mediators and victims, which are the primary criteria for evaluating the moral legitimacy of those who pollute the environment and local governments, where it was also discovered that the two organizations in this study face a variety of challenges in maintaining their legitimacy. This study's implication is serious efforts are required to enhance environmental governance and public participation. This study aims to contribute to the literature on legitimacy management in contentious environmental cases and provide a method for measuring and comprehending the complexity of stakeholder interactions.

Keywords

Oil and gas company, Controversial issues, Oil pipe leaks, Discourse network analysis, Legitimacy theory

Introduction

Environmental consequences of oil and gas operations include water and air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, damage to ecosystems, and the possibility of oil accidents that can disrupt marine and coastal life (Abudu et al., 2022; Hasan et al., 2022; Kwarto et al., 2022). These businesses have a significant obligation to implement sustainable operational practices, minimize negative impacts, and actively partake in environmental restoration (Tetteh et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022). This is crucial not only for preserving ecological equilibrium, but also for preserving reputation and public trust and ensuring long-term operational continuity in the face of global demands for environmental responsibility.

In such instances, when the conflict between oil and gas companies and local communities escalates, parties external to the companies exert pressure and hold oil and gas companies accountable for the impact of their activities on local communities (Hassan et al., 2023a; Nguyen et al., 2022). Therefore, the incident's associated pressure has detrimental effects on the corporations involved. Companies, as profit-

seeking entities, seek out causes of conflict with local communities and are expected to employ certain strategies to mitigate the negative effects of certain incidents (Cust et al., 2023).

Environmental indicators resulting from company operations in developing countries have become a subject of study to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their relationship to corporate responsibility as a whole (Alsaadi, 2022; Harjoto et al., 2022; Lakhani & Herbert, 2022). In recent years, the public has become increasingly concerned about environmental degradation caused by oil and gas operations, particularly in developing nations (Alghizzawi et al., 2022; Ferri et al., 2022). There is a deficiency in the literature that attempts to comprehend how actors respond to their legitimacy in environmental incidents.

In recent years, environmental incidents involving oil and gas companies in Indonesia have become one of the primary topics covered by the media (White et al., 2018). Simultaneously, an increasing amount of research focuses on how oil and gas companies respond to environmental issues that threaten them, particularly in terms of whether these problems are disclosed (Taufik & Adhariani, 2022). Current knowledge is restricted to the fact that environmental incidents pose a threat to a company's disclosure practices. Prior studies have also been limited to developed nations that have responded to environmental issues through environmental disclosure, and there are still a paucity of studies investigating similar issues in developing nations (García-Sánchez et al., 2022; Jizi et al., 2022; Kirsch, 2022; Uduji et al., 2022).

Using the discourse analysis method and the case of Pertamina EP Prabumulih, this study investigates how an Indonesian oil and gas company responds to environmental debates in its operational area. This study aims to identify the dominant actors in the discussion of oil and gas companies' responses to environmental issues, to analyze their relationships and interactions with other actors such as the government and society, and to provide a visualization of discourse networks to comprehend the themes, debates, and dynamics that emerge between them.

Literature Review

Legitimacy Theory

Legitimacy has become one of the central pillars of organizational studies in the modern business world. According to Suchman (1995), legitimacy is the general perception or assumption that an entity's actions are acceptable within certain socially defined boundaries. Legitimacy, in brief, refers to the public's perception and acceptance of an organization or industry, which impacts the organization's survival. To ensure their operational continuity and social acceptability, organizations will continuously endeavor to acquire and maintain legitimacy (Lin, 2021; Zhang & Borden, 2022).

In literature, legitimacy is divided into three categories: regulatory, normative, and cognitive. Regulatory legitimacy emphasizes compliance with laws and regulations to demonstrate that businesses operate within the law (Suchman, 1995). Normative legitimacy, on the other hand, relates to social norms and values that reveal how an organization endeavors to conform to societal expectations, for instance by implementing corporate social responsibility. Cognitive legitimacy, on the other hand, refers to how people recognize and comprehend particular organizations or industries as integral components of the social structure.

Regarding the oil and gas industry, it is unavoidable to acknowledge the sector's negative environmental impacts. This sector is one of the largest emitters of greenhouse gases (Boyd et al., 2010). In contrast, exploitation and production

activities frequently have additional negative effects on the environment, such as water and air pollution, habitat devastation, and the possibility of oil spills (Hassan et al., 2023b). In the context of legitimacy, numerous oil and gas companies demonstrate a growing awareness of the need to respond to environmental requirements. Increasing their legitimacy in the eyes of society, for instance, through corporate social responsibility, partnerships with environmental organizations, and the implementation of their sustainability initiatives, are among the numerous programs available (Hasan et al., 2022).

Research Methods

Using discourse network analysis (Leifeld, 2017), this study compiles a database of online newspaper articles. This study selects a variety of media outlets that cover environmental incidents involving Pertamina EP and its operational areas. The duration of this research is two months, from 9 July 2023 to 20 August 2023. This study employs various search terms, including "Pertamina EP," "Prabumulih," "Sungai Kelekar," "Pipe leaks," and "environmental pollution," to obtain news articles.

This yields 132 news articles from the search results. Then, each article was read individually to determine if it met the predetermined inclusion criteria, which was news about environmental incidents experienced by Pertamina EP. In addition, another criterion is that the news must directly or indirectly cite at least one stakeholder. After employing these criteria, thirty-six narratives qualify for analysis. This significant exclusion is a result of the numerous duplications of both proposed interview excerpts.

A dataset of 32 articles was entered into the software Discourse Network Analyzer (DNA) (Leifeld, 2017). DNA is software that enables researchers to incorporate as statements newspaper excerpts containing arguments from stakeholders regarding environmental incidents caused by Pertamina EP and their area of operations. The statement is comprised of four variables: the identity of the individual stakeholder, the organizational affiliation of the individual stakeholder (actor), the argument referred to by the stakeholder (concept), and the dichotomous variable for agreement or disapproval (Leifeld, 2017). Two researchers independently coded each article sample for this procedure. All articles were coded, after which they discussed the various analysis results and refined the concept statements and coding framework to include new concepts pertaining to environmental incidents. In this coding, 9 concepts are associated with 186 statements, 24 individuals, and 9 organizations.

Visone software assisted with the weighting of degree (%), frequency, closeness, and betweenness in this study (Leifeld, 2017). The relative weights and relations of concepts within DNA represent the level of consensus or discord among stakeholders with regard to particular concepts. This study employs reduced transformations to measure argumentative similarity that transcends disagreement to optimize DNA.

Results and Discussion

This study's findings are divided into two sections: the relationship between person and organization, and the relationship between concept and organization. In each analysis, we analyzed betweenness, closeness, and degree (percent) in addition to interaction frequency.

Kelekar River Pollution Incident

The Kelekar River in Prabumulih City, South Sumatra, has become the epicenter of an environmental crisis due to a Pertamina EP oil pipeline breach. This leak emanates from the 6-inch TLJ-PPP trunkline conduit in the Majasari Village region of the Prabumulih Selatan District. This not only causes physical pollution of the

river's ecosystem, but also has negative effects on the local community. The offensive odor of waste oil is a significant problem, and some residents have even complained that it makes them inebriated. In addition, there are issues with residents' wells that are contaminated due to pollution. Moreover, this disclosure raises several questions regarding liability and compensation.

Organization and Concepts

Based on the identification of actors in Table 1, this research identified several significant entities. With a Betweenness score of 24,146, Walhi Sumsel emerged as the most central entity in terms of organization, indicating a crucial role in connecting various parties. Its position as a key entity is further strengthened by the high interaction frequency, 40 times, and Degree level, 11,842%.

With a Betweenness of 10.923, a Frequency of 34, and a degree level of 9.211%, Pertamina EP Prabumulih also plays a significant role in the issues discussed. In contrast, the Prabumulih City Environmental Service demonstrates significant involvement with Betweenness 7.658 and Frequency 9, highlighting its role in environmental issues. The Betweenness and Degree levels of organisations like the Prabumulih Police Chief and the South Sumatra Provincial Government are relatively low.

Table 1. Organizations

Name	Closeness	Degree (%)	Frequency	Betweenness
Walhi Sumsel (Wahana Lingkungan Hidup)	7.798	11.842	40	24.146
Pertamina EP Prabumulih	6.722	9.211	34	10.923
Society (<i>Masyarakat</i>)	4.998	5.263	15	2.913
Local Government Agency in Environment (<i>Dinas Lingkungan Hidup Kota Prabumulih</i>)	6.288	7.895	9	7.658
Mayor of Prabumulih (<i>Walikota Prabumulih</i>)	5.269	5.263	7	1.977
Regional Representative of Prabumulih (<i>DPRD Kota Prabumulih</i>)	5.269	5.263	6	1.999
Association of Safety, Health, and Environment Practitioners (APK3L)	3.978	2.632	4	0.384
Prabumulih Police Chief (Kapolsek Prabumulih)	4.332	1.316	1	0.000
Provincial Government of South Sumatera (<i>Pemerintah Provinsi Sumatera Selatan</i>)	4.148	1.316	1	0.000

Table 2. Concepts

Name	Closeness	Degree (%)	Frequency	Betweenness
Environmental Impacts (<i>Dampak Lingkungan</i>)	6.722	9.211	32	16.250
Responsibilities (<i>Tanggung Jawab</i>)	6.288	7.895	18	12.702
Community Support (<i>Dukungan Masyarakat</i>)	5.269	3.947	14	1.387
Mitigation Efforts (<i>Upaya Mitigasi</i>)	5.907	6.579	13	3.400
Compensation (<i>Ganti Rugi</i>)	5.907	6.579	11	4.450
Standard (<i>Standar</i>)	5.269	3.947	9	4.710
Regulation (<i>Regulasi</i>)	5.269	3.947	9	4.552
Public Image (<i>Citra Publik</i>)	5.570	5.263	8	1.929
Livelihood (<i>Mata Pencaharian</i>)	4.998	2.632	3	0.618

As shown in Table 2, Environmental Impact is the most prevalent concept, with a Betweenness value of 16.250, indicating that this topic is frequently the subject of discussion. Responsibility also plays a significant role with a Betweenness of 12,702, while Indemnity and Regulation play a smaller but still significant role with Betweenness values of 4,450 and 4,552, respectively.

Person dan Organization

Figure 1 below depicts the network's dynamics in the scenario of environmental contamination caused by a leak in the Pertamina EP oil pipeline on the Kelekar River in Prabumulih City, South Sumatra. With a Betweenness of 86.8421, a Frequency of 22 interactions, a degree of 23.0769%, and a Closeness of 23.0769, Community appears to be the most significant entity in this network, according to our study. This demonstrates that the community serves as a mediator in this network relationship, as it connects different stakeholders and influences the overall dynamics. In greater detail, our study revealed that the community plays a central role in this network because it is the victim of oil pipe leaks. The community complains of a variety of problems, including a pungent odor and intoxication due to oil seeping into residents' wells, which disrupts their daily lives.

Our research also revealed that Pertamina EP Prabumulih, with a degree of 7.8947 and a closeness of 7.6923, plays a central role, though not as central as the role of the community. Our study revealed that Pertamina EP attempted to be responsive by communicating on the fifth day after the river cleansing that 80 percent of the work had been completed by deploying 146 personnel. In addition, we discovered in various

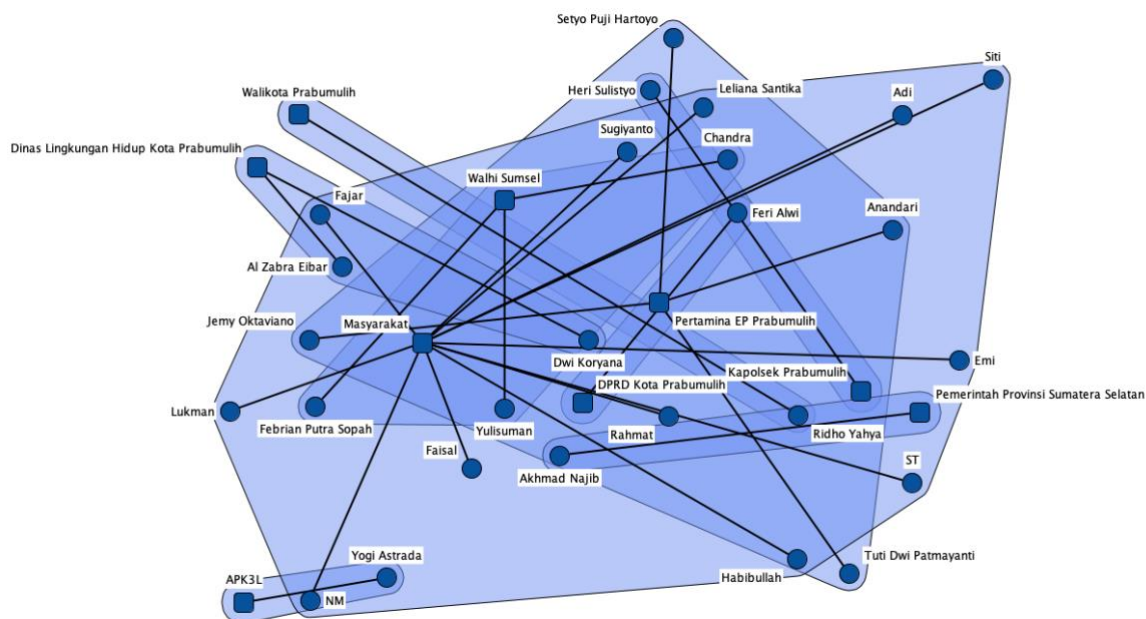


Figure 1. Relationships between person and organization

reports from this study that they apologized and compensated the community with pure water. Pertamina EP also expressed its appreciation for the cooperation of all parties involved in this matter.

The next actor is the Prabumulih City Environmental Service, a government agency with environmental management authority. The role of the Prabumulih City Environmental Service is generally modest but significant. This is indicated by the number of Betweenness (1.3158), the frequency of four interactions, the degree of 3.8462 percent, and the degree of Closeness (3.8462). This study found that DLH Prabumulih City, as a government actor, played a limited role, including coordination, writing, and mediation. The final actor in this network is the DPRD Kota Prabumulih, which has a Betweenness score of 0 and a Degree and Closeness level of 1.9231, indicating that they are peripheral nodes with limited influence. Similarly, the DPRD of Prabumulih City has yet to receive a report despite exhibiting normative responsibilities such as urging and demanding.

Organization and Concept

The relationship between the organization and the concept is depicted in Figure 2 below. With a closeness level of 7,798, a degree of 11,842%, an interaction frequency of 40, and an affinity of 24,146, Walhi Sumsel dominates almost every facet of the network, according to this analysis. This indicates that Walhi Sumsel, as a non-governmental organization, plays a central function as a hub or focal point in a network that influences decisions and public opinion. Walhi Sumsel, an environmental NGO, demonstrates its support for the community by bringing up concepts such as Pertamina EP's unsuccessful mitigation efforts because a similar incident occurred previously. Walhi Sumsel also stated that Pertamina EP could be prosecuted for its neglect in causing this incident.

Pertamina EP Prabumulih stood out in our investigation with an affinity score of 6,722, a degree of 9,211%, and a frequency of 34. Its high affinity level (10,923) suggests that it plays an important function in this network. Pertamina EP is one of the parties with the most interaction and influence over the discussion or decision in this instance. The Pertamina EP focuses primarily on responsibility and compensation. They demonstrate their responsiveness and performance in addressing environmental issues as part of their responsibility. They stated that they would pro-

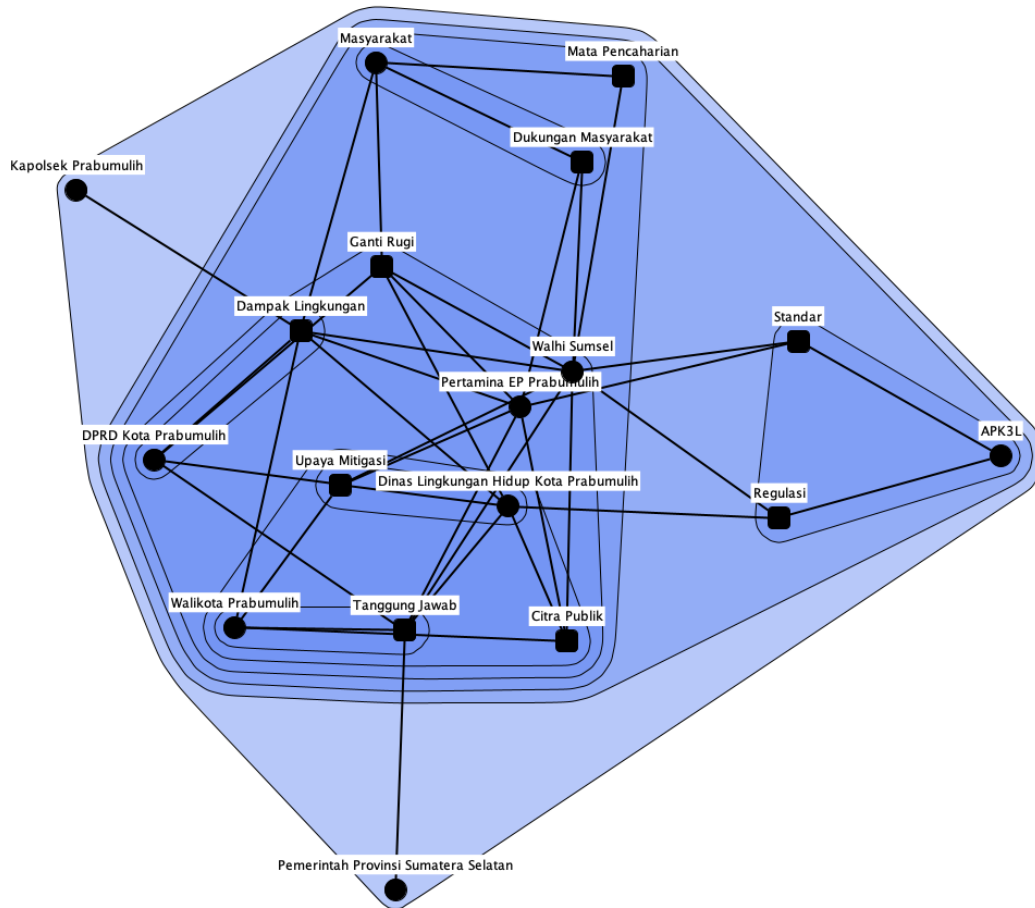


Figure 2. Relationship between organizations and concepts

vide the community with compensation, one of which was pure water.

Regarding the concept, there are two notable strengths. The first topic is environmental impact, which has a closeness level of 6,722, a degree of 9,211%, a frequency of 32, and the greatest betweenness of 16,250. This indicates that the issue of environmental impact is one that many parties are concerned with. As a significant concept, environmental impact has been extensively discussed by the public and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), by identifying the sensory impacts felt by the community, such as odor, change in watercolor, and taste of water due to pollution.

In addition, the issue of responsibility, which had a closeness of 6,288, a degree of 7,895%, a frequency of 18, and a betweenness of 12,702, was identified as a central topic in the dialogue and was extensively discussed by a number of actors in this study. Pertamina EP demonstrates a sense of responsibility by cleaning up the river.

Moreover, concepts such as Mitigation and Compensation Efforts demonstrate a low but still significant level of activity, with an affinity in the range of 5 and a degree between 6-7%. This demonstrates that, despite being less central than other conceptions, both are still being discussed by a variety of parties. Regarding mitigation efforts, Pertamina EP is accused of not taking action. Pertamina EP, however, attributed this event to climate change. In the meantime, compensation is a contentious issue because Pertamina EP has provided compensation. On the other hand, the compensation is deemed insufficient due to the potential for long-term effects.

Discussion

This study employs the legitimacy theory framework by Suchman (1995) to identify

and analyze individuals, actors, and concepts to comprehend the dynamics of relationships between various actors in the context of an oil pipeline rupture in the Kelekar River, Prabumulih City, South Sumatra. Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as the general perception or presumption that the actions of actors conform to the norms, values, beliefs, definitions, and prescriptions of the social system in which they operate. The primary findings of this study indicate that the community is the most significant entity in this network. This finding calls into doubt the legitimacy of the government and Pertamina EP in carrying out their responsibilities.

Within the network formed, this study discovered that the community serves as a mediator and is also frequently described as a victim. In greater detail, society provides moral legitimacy, specifically the type of legitimacy that is founded on a normative evaluation of an entity's activities (Chaturvedi, 2023; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). In this instance, the community evaluates Pertamina EP and government entities according to the direct effect the oil pipeline rupture had on them. Pertamina EP's legitimacy is in jeopardy due to the existence of significant environmental impacts, such as stinging and well contamination.

This study also revealed that Pertamina EP has made multiple attempts to regain their legitimacy. Despite Walhi Sumsel's criticism, this study found that Pertamina EP attempted to demonstrate responsibility by tidying up and providing compensation. In relation to legitimacy theory, Walhi Sumsel investigates the cognitive legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) of Pertamina EP, i.e., the extent to which their actions are viewed as inevitable or necessary.

This investigation found that the legitimacy of the local government entities represented in this case was questioned by the Environment Agency and the Regional Representatives. Even though their role was determined to be less neutral than that of the community and Pertamina EP, it is still essential to consider their legitimacy. In literature, legitimacy is frequently viewed as a resource that government actors can distribute to uphold social and ecological justice (Rose-Ackerman, 2017; van Engen et al., 2019). However, their low levels of activity have prompted detractors to query whether they are fulfilling their responsibility to uphold justice and sustainability. The local government's indecisiveness in dealing with oil breach cases and the normative role it has displayed are two indications that it has not made any firm decisions and is facing a difficult decision (Hannigan & Kueneman, 1977). On the one hand, they are responsible for protecting those affected by pipe leaks, while on the other, they must cultivate an investment climate that traps them in intricate relationships.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to investigate the legitimacy dynamics of various actors in the context of oil pipeline breaches. The findings of this study indicate that society plays a central role as a mediator and victim who should influence the moral legitimacy of various actors. This study also found that Pertamina EP and the regional government confronted significant challenges in maintaining their legitimacy, particularly given the case's direct and substantial impact on society and the environment.

This study's implications pertain to the significance of considering the perspective and legitimacy of society when addressing environmental issues. This study's findings provide insights into how actors can restore or maintain their legitimacy in controversial and problematic situations to enhance environmental governance, public participation, and accountability. This study has several limitations, including cases that refer to specific geographic locations, which limits the generalizability of the study's findings, and the incomplete incorporation of variables that influence legitimacy, such as actor trust and institutional capacity of each actor. Consequently,

future research may combine DNA investigations with empirical research.

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