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(De)legitimising Social Actors in 2025 Sumatra Floods News Reports: A Corpus-based Discourse Study

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ABSTRACT

The 2025 floods in Sumatra have attracted global attention due to deforestation and ecological issues, which are assumed to be the main factors driving the phenomenon. This paper aims to investigate how Indonesian mass media discursively construct the 2025 Sumatra floods, using a corpus-based discourse approach and van Leeuwen's social actor network and legitimation theories. Data were collected from Kompas.com, one of the online newspapers with the highest readership in Indonesia. The news reports were downloaded semi-automatically using Bootcat and analysed using a corpus software named AntConc 4.3.1. The analytical steps include describing word frequency, interpreting the co-occurrence of the most frequent words with the collocation feature, and explaining the social actor and legitimation through concordances. Findings reveal that Indonesian media includes government agencies as the dominant social actors, realised through functionalisation and nomination. The juxtaposition of personal names and authoritative functions within government agencies conveys that flood reporting is constructed as a coordinated, manageable phenomenon. In contrast, Indonesian mass media categorise victims through genericisation and passive constructions, which reinforces their marginal positions. This strategy emphasises foregrounding government agencies as the heroes of the disaster event. Seen through the lens of legitimation strategies, Kompas.com employs authorisation, rationalisation, and moral evaluation to enhance news credibility and construct public support, which contributes to the heroisation of government agencies. This study demonstrates how a corpus-based approach can reveal the role of mass media in shaping public perception of an environmental issue.

Keywords: *climate action, discourse, floods, legitimation, social actor.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Floods have become increasingly frequent environmental crises in Indonesia, particularly in Sumatra. Some related issues, such as deforestation, extractive industries,

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and uneven urban development, surround the news of the 2025 floods in Sumatra (Suwarno et al., 2025). Despite the thousands of victims, the 2025 Sumatra floods constitute not only a material disaster, but also a discursive event between responsibility, agency, and accountability presented in the mass media (Afandi et al., 2025; Fuadi et al., 2026). In this sense, news reports not only present environmental crises but also shape public understanding by highlighting certain social actors. Mass media function not only to disseminate information about the current situation, the number of victims, and the emergency centre, but also to construct public perceptions and behaviour towards environmental issues, such as climate change (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007).

Understanding how environmental crises are represented in the media requires a critical lens to examine whether such representations advocate for the environment and acknowledge the subjects responsible for its mitigation, or instead obscure them. Floods, as one of the most recurrent and visible manifestations of environmental crisis in Indonesia, sharpen this representational stake. Recent studies show that flood coverage does not merely report rising water and displaced residents, but also frames blame and distributes responsibility among social actors, such as attributing disasters to nature while erasing the structural and industrial factors behind them (Oktavian et al., 2026) and shapes public perception of an event's cause and consequence (Pratama & Mustofa, 2025). Because these representational choices are made through wording, examining them requires positioning language as a tool of power and legitimation (van Leeuwen, 2007). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) foregrounds exactly how lexical and grammatical choices in news discourse construct particular versions of events and particular positions for social actors, legitimising some while delegitimising others (van Dijk, 1993).

From a critical discourse analysis (CDA) lens, news reports are ideological because they legitimise and delegitimise their wordings to construct the public's perspective on the floods, such as assigning blame, shaping credibility, and asserting authority (Mehr-Un-Nisa et al., 2025; Mosurska et al., 2023; Ula et al., 2026). Floods are no longer seen as natural disasters but as manifestations of climate change, the government's failure to regulate forests, and poor spatial management in relation to massive infrastructure development (Suhandano et al., 2024). In order to empirically uncover mass media's (de)legitimation strategies of social actors in mass media, this study adopts van Leeuwen's theory to examine how social actors, such as governments, corporations, and local communities, are discursively constructed and (de)legitimised in news reports. van Leeuwen's (2008) theoretical model offers a systematic way to analyse the social actor representational choices, including the inclusion and exclusion strategies to (de)legitimise particular social actors while marginalising others.

Recent studies of the 2025 Sumatra floods have been conducted by varied approaches, such as Habermas' public sphere theory in examining the government and public responses in various documents and on social media (Arkania et al., 2025), frames of WALHI's communication strategies in political lobbying (Aulia et al., 2026), frames of *CNN Indonesia* and *Detik* news of Sumatra disaster status (Subiyakto, 2025), the regional legislators' communication strategies in the public's aspirations (Oktalisa et al., 2025), Michael Foucault's critical discourse analysis of the government's policy (Afandi et al., 2025), lexical choices of the Indonesian President's communication strategies in the Sumatra floods (Pangestu & Firdaus, 2026), and framing actors on YouTube videos on the Sumatra floods (Fuadi et al., 2026). The closest study by Fuadi et al. (2026) found that the 2025 Sumatra floods were framed through non-state digital actors in order to delegitimise political figures in the public space.

According to Arkania et al. (2025), the government made effective use of social media in responding to the 2025 Sumatra floods, although online reactions ranged from criticism and rational argumentation to commentary on the effectiveness of inter-organisational coordination. Their study further shows that this communication remained largely one-directional: direct public engagement with government accounts remained limited compared to the more active exchanges occurring among citizens themselves. Aulia et al. (2026), meanwhile, demonstrate how WALHI's ecological media narratives functioned as a form of political lobbying that shaped public policy, a strategy they argue was instrumental in reframing the anthropogenic lens through which the Sumatra floods were understood. Most directly relevant to the present study, Subiyakto (2025) compares news framing of the Sumatra floods across Indonesian outlets, finding that CNN and Detik News diverged in their coverage. These outlets' differing wording choices surfaced in how each narrated the issue, selected sources, portrayed the government's role, and characterised the disaster's impact. Subiyakto's study, however, drew on a relatively limited dataset, pointing to the need for a larger corpus to map broader patterns across news media disaster reporting.

However, previous studies did not specifically discuss social actors and legitimation strategies and relied on only a small amount of data from social and mass media. This study addresses that gap by examining, through a broader corpus, how Kompas.com, Indonesia's most accessed and critical online outlet, legitimises and delegitimises social actors in its coverage of the 2025 Sumatra floods. Specifically, this study took Kompas.com as the main data. Kompas.com was identified in the 2023 IPWS survey as the online news outlet most frequently visited by Indonesian digital citizens, and as their preferred source for political, economic, and lifestyle news; the same survey also ranked it as the most critical of the mass media outlets assessed (Mantalean & Meiliana, 2023). Given its standing as one of Indonesia's leading news organisations, Kompas.com editorial practices have come to serve as an influential model for online news reporting across the country (Graf, 2003).

This study incorporates big data into the analysis to enhance analytical rigour, transparency, and replicability for future studies. This study also identifies recurrent linguistic patterns in big data to uncover subtle yet systematic discursive tendencies that may not be directly apparent in manual analysis. By combining quantitative and qualitative analyses, this study also identifies the salient lexical patterns associated with different social actors and explains how these patterns realise (de)legitimation strategies. Therefore, this study aims to 1) identify the dominant linguistic patterns to represent social actors in the 2025 Sumatra floods, and 2) analyse how these patterns articulate the (de)legitimation strategies in news reports. This study contributes methodologically to corpus-assisted discourse studies and to research on environmental issues in Indonesia. By revealing how social actors are (de)legitimised across a large number of news articles, this study highlights the media's role in shaping environmental justice in the public interest.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS)

CADS stems from the integration of technology, big data, and critical discourse analysis. It is an approach that uses corpus linguistics as the method and discourse analysis as the framework to examine how discourse is constructed through patterns of language in big data. It believes that recurring linguistic patterns, such as word frequency and co-occurrence, provide empirical evidence to support qualitative interpretations of discourse in certain social and cultural contexts. In this sense, discourse refers to language use in an attempt to influence the beliefs and behaviour of other people (Partington et al., 2013). In addition, CADS helps systematically investigate how language reflects and constructs power relations and ideologies (Fuster Márquez et al., 2021). CADS uses empirical evidence to uncover how discourse is constructed through wording, as evidenced in word frequency patterns that reveal recurrent language. Through a critical lens, the recurrent patterns can be employed to identify social power abuse, dominance, and inequality (Baker, 2012).

CADS has been employed in discourses of environmental crises, such as the mass media's framing of climate change and global warming (Isti'anah et al., 2025), transboundary haze in Indonesian and Malaysian mass media (Suhandano et al., 2025), and copper mining discourse in Arizona (Poole, 2016). Those studies provide empirical evidence on how salient and backgrounded words are employed to legitimise certain social actors and actions in the discourse. In the context of global warming in Indonesia, Isti'anah et al. (2025) uncovered the institutionalising discourse through the dominance of science-related social actors in climate mitigation. Similarly, Suhandano et al. (2025) revealed that Indonesian mass media conceal palm oil companies in the forest fires discourse, showing the eco-destructive discourse in the media. In the copper mining context, Poole (2016) figured out how mining development is legitimised through incentives such as education and scholarship to the society.

2.2 Social Actors and Legitimation Strategies

Social actor is a framework introduced by van Leeuwen to examine how individuals or groups are represented in a discourse. This framework relies on the socio-semantic model to provide a tool to analyse the linguistic strategies that are employed to include, exclude, or categorise social actors in a discourse (van Leeuwen, 2013). Social actors play certain roles in a society, represented through varied strategies, such as inclusion, exclusion, activation, or passivation. The social actor representation is also realised through some linguistic means, such as naming the actor explicitly (nomination) or grouping into categories (categorisation). Such strategies reflect viewpoints or ideologies. For example, functionalisation and categorisation were employed in the #ENDSARS protest to construct the Nigerian government as an oppressive and murderous agent (Akinrinlola et al., 2025).

In van Leeuwen's framework, legitimation refers to the process by which actions, ideologies, or decisions are justified and made acceptable within a social or cultural context (van Leeuwen, 2007). This is achieved through specific discursive strategies that provide implicit or explicit reasons for why something is valid or necessary. Those strategies are authorisation, meaning that justification is made based on authority figures,

laws, rules, or traditions; while moral evaluation refers to justification through ethical values, closely related to cultural or societal norms. In addition, rationalisation refers to justification through logical reasoning, practicality, or purpose, while mythopoesis articulates justification through storytelling or narratives that convey lessons or cultural significance (Abuelwafa, 2021; Kolmogorova & Kozachina, 2020; van Leeuwen, 2007).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study was conducted within a corpus-assisted discourse study (CADS) (Baker & McEnery, 2015) by constructing a specialised corpus of news reports on the 2025 Sumatra floods from Kompas.com, one of Indonesia's most widely read newspapers. The keyword search on the newspaper website was restricted to *banjir Sumatra* "Sumatra floods", published between November 21, 2025, and December 8, 2025. The 14-day state of emergency in West Sumatra (25 November-8 December) expired on December 8, 2025, capturing the intense crisis-response phase when social actors are most actively built, blamed, and (de) legitimised in the press. The data were collected by retrieving each article's URL for download using BootCat software (Baroni & Bernardini, 2004). Based on the collection, this study found 1,540 articles, totalling 561,489 tokens. The compiled corpus was in .txt format and uploaded to AntConc 4.31 for further quantitative analysis (Anthony, 2024). The corpus was named *Kompas_Banjir Sumatra* and stored in AntConc's corpus manager.

Following Baker and McEnery's CADS analytical steps, this study first identified the social actors from the word lists. We restricted ourselves to the 500 most frequent words. The 500-word cut-off was chosen as it is long enough to capture the naming, categorisation, and role-labelling choices through which social actors are constructed (van Leeuwen, 2013), but short enough for each word to be checked manually in context and coded consistently, a balance often struck in corpus-assisted discourse studies (Baker, 2006). The word lists were downloaded, imported into Microsoft Excel, and sorted by social actors, referring to van Leeuwen's (2013) theory. The social actors refer to words denoting people and institutions that appear in the first 500 most frequent words in the corpus. Therefore, function words such as *di* "in", *dan* "and", and *yang* "that" were eliminated from the data. In addition, lexical words that do not refer to social actors, such as *banjir* "flood", *Sumatera*, and *Kompas* were not included in the analysis, as well. After removing such restrictions from the word lists, we found 46 lexemes referring to social actors.

The further analytical steps include examining collocation by restricting to five words on either side (5Left-5Right) of the social actor investigated to identify the legitimation strategies that appeared in the news (van Leeuwen, 2007). The likelihood score for involvement in the collocation analysis was 3.84, indicating that the co-occurrence of words does not occur by chance and that the words are statistically significant (McEnery & Hardie, 2012). Since this study examined a single corpus, it used the Mutual Information (MI) score with a threshold of ≥ 3.0 to assess the collocation effect. In other words, this study combined MI ≥ 3.0 with LL ≥ 3.84 to ensure that retained word pairs were both statistically significant and strongly, distinctively associated with the social actor in question, following Hunston's (2022) convention that an MI score of 3 or higher is an indication of genuine collocation rather than chance co-

occurrence. Conducting collocation analysis is crucial for uncovering how such social actors are constructed within specific activities or frames.

The final step was to include concordances or keyword-in-context (KWIC) to examine the contexts in which social actors are employed in news reports. KWIC demonstrates the contextual use of social actors in the corpus to be further analysed in terms of the mass media's legitimation strategies. By examining the context, we can determine whether certain actors are involved in news reports through authorisation, rationalisation, or moral evaluation, as suggested by van Leeuwen (2007). The legitimation strategies are thematised in terms of the news topics in which social actors were involved, such as reporting on victims or claiming responsibility for the government's flood mitigation actions.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Social Actors in 2025 Sumatra Floods

This study aims to examine the (de)legitimation strategies of social actors in Indonesian mass media using a corpus-based approach. The initial step was to identify which social actors were included in the news reports using the word lists. After careful identification, 46 lexemes belong to social actors, which can be grouped into five major categories: companies, government agencies, public, suspected agents, and victims. Figure 1 shows that government agencies were the most frequent social actors, with 13,954 instances, followed by victims with 11,753. The public is the next social actor, appearing 1,358 times, while suspected agents and companies occur least frequently, with 277 and 272 instances, respectively. Figure 1 shows the summary of word frequency referring to social actors in Sumatra news reports.

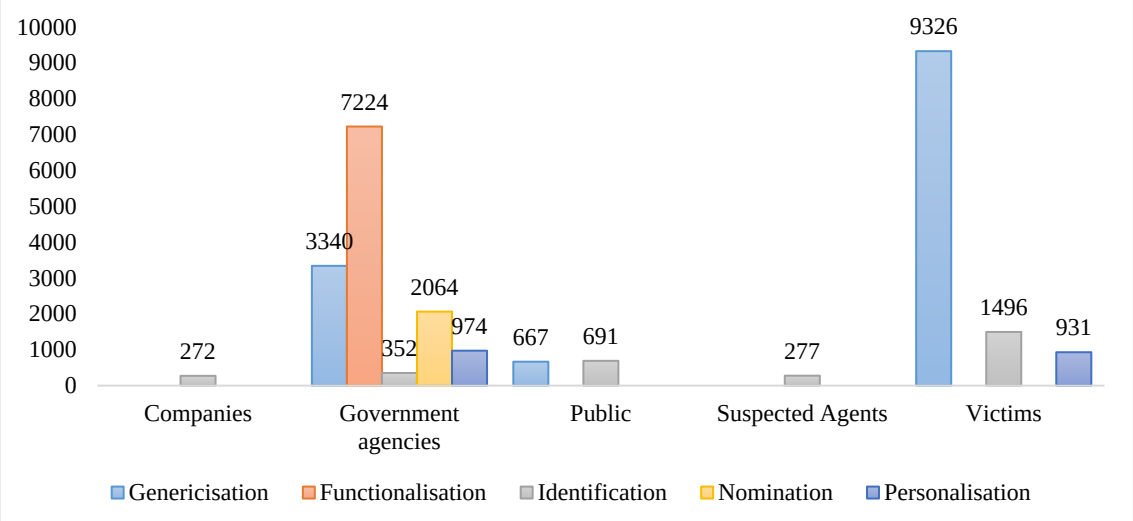


Figure 1. Social actor representation strategies in Indonesian media of the 2025 Sumatra floods.

The statistical findings in Figure 1 demonstrate the inclusion of government agencies and victims as the salient social actors. On the other hand, the companies, public, and suspected agents are excluded from the flood reporting since their frequencies are

lower. This discursive strategy aims to background deforestation and extractive industries as the triggering factors of the floods, as evidenced by the absence or backgrounding of corporations in the quantitative results. In other words, the suppression of corporate agency serves to protect economic interests, contrasting with the high "activation" of the government agencies. This empirical finding is in line with environmental crisis news reports, such as transboundary haze and climate change in Indonesian mass media (Isti'anah et al., 2025; Suhandano et al., 2025). Therefore, it can be said that Indonesian mass media reproduce the dominant ideology to conceal anthropocentric factors in contributing to environmental problems, including floods.

The first linguistic strategy to include social actors in the corpus is through genericisation. van Leeuwen (2013) asserts that social actors can be represented as general categories, such as *immigrants.* In the 2025 Sumatra floods, Indonesian mass media utilised this strategy most frequently, as shown by the words *korban* "victims" (3,411), *warga* "citizens" (2,970), *orang* "people" (1,950), *pemerintah* "government" (1,638), *masyarakat* "communities" (995), *mahasiswa* "university students" (265), *publik* "public" (204), and *manusia* "people" (198). Most of those social actors refer to victims and the public, while only one lexeme belongs to a government institution, shown by the word *government* (1,638). Below is an example of social actors realised through genericisation.

(1) *Deputi Bidang Sistem dan Strategi Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Bencana (BNPB), Raditya Jati, memastikan bahwa bantuan dari Kemlu ini akan disalurkan kepada* ***masyarakat*** *yang terdampak banjir di Sumatera.*
[Deputy for Systems and Strategy of the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB), Raditya Jati, confirmed that aid from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will be distributed to **communities** affected by flooding in Sumatra]. (Octavia & Carina, 2025)

Example (1) also includes another social actor, realised through functionalisation, *the National Disaster Management Agency.* The juxtaposition between the genericisation of *victims* and the functionalisation of *government institutions* is narrated in the 2025 Sumatra floods. The victims are passivised as social actors who receive actions from the government institutions. The verb *evacuate* in example (1) activates the joint team as an actor who functions to help the victims. In addition, the use of passive voice in example (1) also locates *BNPB* as the active agent that distributes the aid to the victims. This finding is supported by the previous example, which locates the *government* as the social actor.

Another strategy employed by Indonesian mass media to include social actors is functionalisation. This strategy involves representing social actors in terms of their roles or functions within a specific context. For instance, *police* might be functionalized as "enforcers of security", which can influence public perception of their actions during events like protests (Qowim & Degaf, 2024). The corpus analysis shows some social actors realised through functionalisation, namely *BNPB* "the National Disaster Management Agency" (996), *kepala* "head" (829), *tim* "team" (774), TNI "Indonesian National Army" (557), *bupati* "regent" (507), *presiden* "president" (497), *kementrian* "ministry" (436), *gubernur* "governor" (317), *polri* "Indonesian Republic police" (284), *ketua* "chair" (256), *anggota* "squad" (217), *kehutanan* "forestry" (214), *petugas* "officer" (206), *polda* "regional police" (195), *kelurahan* "ward" (193), *personel* "personnel" (183), and *basarnas* "national search and rescue agency" (182).

The National Disaster Management Agency *(BNPB)* appears to have the highest frequency in the corpus, realised as a social actor through functionalisation, as depicted in the following example.

(2) *"Secara total korban meninggal yang tervalidasi 770 jiwa dan korban hilang yang masih dalam pencarian 463 jiwa," ujar Kepala Pusat Data Informasi dan Komunikasi Kebencanaan* ***BNPB****, Abdul Muhari, dilaporkan oleh Kompas.com, Rabu (3/12/2025).*
["In total, the number of validated fatalities is 770 people and the number of missing victims who are still being searched for is 463 people," said the Head of the **BNPB** Disaster Data Information and Communication Center, Abdul Muhari, as reported by Kompas.com, Wednesday (3/12/2025)]. (Janati et al., 2025)

The above example shows that functionalisation is employed by foregrounding the social actor's functional role. In example (2), *BNPB* is represented by a specific function, the Head of the *Disaster Data Information and Communication Centre,* which emphasises the roles of managing and disseminating disaster-related information. In addition, the Indonesian news media includes a nomination by mentioning *Abdul Muhari* by his official title. Therefore, the media shapes authority and expertise as institutionally grounded. The functionalisation articulates the credibility of the reported data and positions *BNPB* as the central social actor responsible for disaster management and communication. In other words, mass media aims to build institutional authority and accountability. Some other government institutions appear to be the collocates of *BNPB;* they are *Polri, Kementerian, TNI, and Basarnas.*

The co-occurrence of *BNPB* with other institutions, such as *Polri, TNI, Basarnas*, and other government agencies, further reinforces the functionalisation strategy by shaping social actors as part of an integrated institutional network. This strategy underscores coordinated action and shared responsibility in managing the floods. Some actions are nominalised, such as *search and rescue operations, logistics distribution,* and *access restoration of the affected areas.* The mass media select the nominalised actions to emphasise the coordinated flood management system. In addition, the impersonal tone conveyed by the nominalisation reinforces the public's perception that disaster response is handled through structured, professional operations. In other words, the nominalisation aligns with the social actors' functionalisation to construct flood discourse from the institutional roles and processes.

The last social actor representation strategy employed by Indonesian mass media is through nomination. It refers to naming individuals or groups explicitly, often to personalise or individualise them. The corpus shows some lexemes, realised through nomination, which are *Prabowo* (786), *Suharyanto* (251), *Raja* (201), *Abdul* (195), *Gibran* (206), and *Subianto* (180). Below is an example.

(3) *Presiden Prabowo Subianto meninjau para pengungsi di utara Sumatera pada Senin (1/12/2025), dan menyoroti persoalan pasokan bahan bakar serta akses jalan menuju daerah yang terdampak.*
[President **Prabowo** Subianto visited refugees in northern Sumatra on Monday (1/12/2025), and highlighted the issue of fuel supplies and road access to the affected areas]. (Ulya & Damarjari, 2025)

The example above shows that nomination is employed to explicitly identify and personalise social actors through proper names. The name *Prabowo* is directly used and functionalised as well through the title *president.* This strategy is intertwined with institutional authority, which foregrounds both the social actor's personal agency and the

official authority of the social actor. In this manner, Indonesian mass media aims to enhance the salience of Prabowo's actions in the discourse. By naming the president, the mass media also individualise responsibility and leadership in responding to the floods, specifically in evaluating refugee conditions, fuel supply, and access to infrastructure. Through nominalisation, mass media also build a more personalised narrative to make flood news more relatable and politically important.

4.2 (De)legitimation Strategies of Social Actor Representations in the News

Mass media serve as a tool to disseminate information of risk awareness and preparedness, frame disaster events, shape public perception, and influence public behaviour, such as encouraging public resilience and participation in disaster recovery efforts (Joye, 2018; Mafofo et al., 2021; Miranda, 2025). Those functions are facilitated by linguistic choices, which represent the media's intentions in constructing a discourse. In other words, mass media can (de)legitimate social actors through their news reporting. This study concludes that Indonesian mass media use legitimation strategies in framing the 2025 Sumatra floods for the public, realised through rationalisation, authorisation, and moral evaluation. Each legitimation strategy is explained in the following paragraphs.

Rationalisation, in van Leeuwen's sense, refers to legitimation by providing logical reasons for actions to emphasise efficiency or necessity. This strategy presents actions as rational and justified based on practical outcomes. Some recent examples of rationalisation are evident in rationalising controversial decisions in political discourse by highlighting intended benefits or the urgency of the situation (Mishra, 2025). Below is an example of rationalisation.

(4) *Direksi PT Bank Tabungan Negara (Persero) Tbk (BBTN)* ***terjun langsung*** *ke Padang, Sumatera Utara untuk menyalurkan bantuan kepada masyarakat dan karyawan perseroan yang terdampak bencana banjir.*
[The Board of Directors of PT Bank Tabungan Negara (Persero) Tbk (BBTN) **went directly** to Padang, North Sumatra, to distribute aid to the community and company employees affected by the flood disaster]. (Setiawan, 2025)

In example (4), rationalisation is examined from the actions of the boards of directors in responding to the floods. The phrase *terjun langsung ke Padang* "went directly to Padang" conveys immediacy and hands-on involvement to construct the directors' presence as a logical way to ensure proper aid delivery. This strategy suggests that direct intervention is the most appropriate action to justify the company's involvement. In addition, the active verb *menyalurkan* reinforces the benefits provided by the *BTN* company. The excerpt aims to construct public support, exemplified by the *BTN* company. In addition, the affected participants (community and company employees) are either victims or beneficiaries of the action. The rationalisation strategy employed in example (4) is in the form of moralised action, or "expression which refers to an action by distilling from it a quality, which can 'moralise' it" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 102).

The other rationalisation employed by Indonesian mass media is through instrumental rationalisation. The authority is grounded in a government agency, as shown in the following example.

(5) ***Kementerian PU*** *memastikan upaya penanganan banjir akan terus diperkuat dengan menyiapkan langkah tindak lanjut berupa penambahan alat berat, normalisasi sungai dan saluran, pemantauan*

infrastruktur sumber daya air, serta melanjutkan evakuasi warga terdampak ke lokasi yang lebih aman.
[The Ministry of Public Works ensures that flood management efforts will continue to be strengthened by preparing follow-up measures in the form of additional heavy equipment, normalising rivers and canals, monitoring water resource infrastructure, and continuing the evacuation of affected residents to safer locations]. (Bahfein & Alexander, 2025)

The legitimation in excerpt (5) is reinforced by highlighting technical and procedural actions, such as adding heavy equipment, normalising rivers and canals, monitoring water levels, and evacuating residents. Those actions are legitimised through institutional authority to frame them as logical responses to the crisis. Seen from the collocation analysis, the *ministry* co-occurs with material verbs, such as *menelusuri* "tracing", *mengerahkan* "deploying", *berkoordinasi* "coordinating", *menginstruksikan* "instructing", and *monitoring.* The pattern shown in example (5) shows that instrumental rationalisation is realised through inter-institutional networks. The collocation of the *Ministry* with varied governmental bodies shapes the public's perception of the coordinated authority. This strategy amplifies the legitimation of multi-agency expertise in managing the floods. In van Leeuwen's concept, this discursive construction articulates legitimation, which is derived from the multiple authoritative subjects.

The second legitimation feature is identified through authorisation, which refers to legitimation through the authority of tradition, law, or recognised figures to justify actions. This strategy invokes established norms or figures of authority to lend credibility to a discourse (van Leeuwen, 2007). In the political speech, leaders may reference historical precedents or legal frameworks to legitimise their decisions (Abuelwafa, 2021). Statistically, the figures of authority employed refer to government agencies, as shown in the following example.

(6) *"Secara total korban meninggal yang tervalidasi 770 jiwa dan korban hilang yang masih dalam pencarian 463 jiwa," ujar* ***Kepala Pusat Data Informasi dan Komunikasi Kebencanaan BNPB****, Abdul Muhari, dilaporkan oleh Kompas.com, Rabu (3/12/2025).*
["In total, the number of validated fatalities is 770 people, and the number of missing victims who are still being searched for is 463 people," said the **Head of the BNPB Disaster Data Information and Communication Centre**, Abdul Muhari, as reported by Kompas.com, Wednesday (3/12/2025)]. (Janati et al., 2025)

The legitimation is identified from the statement of the head of the *BNPB* Disaster Data Information and Communication Centre, or categorised as an expert authority. This subtype of authorisation is also marked by the verbal process, realised in direct quotes, as shown in excerpt (6). The number of affected victims in Sumatra floods is legitimised through the government agency, as the expert having the authority to report the disaster. van Leeuwen (2007) asserts that expert authority shifts the status of an event to the expertise. In this sense, Indonesian media foregrounds the news reliability by relying on experts' statements in reporting the issue. This strategy is also selected to enhance the news credibility.

In addition to expert authority, legitimation is also identified from impersonal authority. This strategy is usually identified in laws, rules, and regulations when answering the question "why" (van Leeuwen, 2007), as shown in example (7).

(7) *PP No. 96 Tahun 2021 jo. PP No. 39 Tahun 2025 kembali menguatkan arah itu.* ***Aturan pelaksana*** *ini mempermudah penetapan Wilayah Izin Usaha Pertambangan, mempercepat proses perizinan, dan mempertebal kepastian hukum bagi pelaku usaha.*

[Government Regulation No. 96 of 2021, in conjunction with Government Regulation No. 39 of 2025, further reinforces this direction. **These implementing regulations** simplify the determination of Mining Business Permit Areas, expedite the licensing process, and enhance legal certainty for business actors]. (Arief, 2025)

The impersonal authority is marked by the noun phrase *these implementing regulations*, functioning as the subject of the clause. In this example, legitimation relies on the authority of codified legal instruments. This strategy legitimises a formal answer to the implicit question of why certain actions or policies are justified (van Leeuwen, 2007). The example (7) also provides further procedural clarity, which is integral to the outcomes, such as *expediting the licensing process* and *enhancing legal certainty.* The mass media indirectly criticise the regulations that trigger the severe floods in Sumatra. The massive mining industry is supported by government regulations that make it easier to open new mining operations in areas such as Jambi. WALHI recorded more than a thousand hectares of unreclaimed former mining pits. By employing impersonal authority, Indonesian mass media aims to promote an ecological perspective by criticising the government's unecological regulations, as shown in example (7). This strategy aims to delegitimise the government's policy that promotes unecological industrial practice.

The other example of impersonal authorisation is the use of the inclusive pronoun *we*, referring to the members of Commission IV of the House of Representatives and other government agencies. In van Leeuwen's concept, this impersonal authority is grounded in the institution rather than individual expertise. The pronoun underscores a unified, authoritative stance to present the claim, particularly the link between deforestation and disaster. Statistically, the inclusive pronoun *we* ranks fourth among the most frequently used words in Indonesian mass media reporting on the Sumatra flood, appearing 1,702 times. Seen from the collocation analysis, the word *we* co-occurs with the material verbs, such as *sampaikan* "convey", *berkoordinasi* "coordinate", *lakukan* "do", *laporkan* "report", *mendata* "record", *informasikan* "inform", *berkomitmen* "commit", and *kirimkan* "send". Those material verbs are employed to legitimise social actors, which are realised in impersonal authorisation. The managerial verbs are used in the mass media to emphasise coordinated actions by government agencies in conveying information, data, and commitment to managing the impacts of floods.

The last legitimation strategy is moral evaluation, which involves justifying actions on ethical grounds or in line with societal values. This strategy appeals to the audience's sense of right and wrong, which often frames actions as morally justified. In the political context, leaders may present their policies as altruistic or beneficial for the greater good, which aligns their actions with societal values (Mishra, 2025; Riani, 2022). This strategy appeals to the audience's sense of right and wrong, which often frames actions as morally justified. Below is an example.

(8) *Empat personel TNI sempat diterjang arus deras saat **membantu evakuasi warga** terdampak banjir di Desa Garoga, Kecamatan Batangtoru, Kabupaten Tapanuli Selatan, Sumatera Utara, pada Selasa (25/11/2025).*
[Four TNI (Indonesian National Army) personnel were swept away by strong currents while **helping evacuate residents** affected by flooding in Garoga Village, Batangtoru District, South Tapanuli Regency, North Sumatra, on Tuesday]. (Wisely & Jaya, 2025)

The social actor above is shown by the government agency, *four TNI personnel.* This social actor's role is legitimised by moral evaluation, as shown by the verb phrase *helping evacuate residents.* The verb *helping* carries strong positive moral connotations

that imply the social actor with humanitarian responsibility and social duty. This moral evaluation implies evaluative adjectives, such as *heroic* or *brave*. Therefore, this legitimation is realised through moral evaluation, particularly through abstraction. The legitimation is embedded in the action itself to represent a naturalised military role as protectors and caregivers in disaster response.

This study finds that government institutions and victims are the most frequent social actors involved in Sumatra flood news reports. This finding aligns with and expands on the recent discourse on the 2025 Sumatra floods by highlighting a different strategy adopted by the newspapers. While Subiyakto (2025) noted that *CNN Indonesia* questioned the urgency of government policy, this study reveals that Kompas.com actively construct government agencies as the heroes through a combination of functionalisation and moral evaluation. This finding contrasts with the work of Fuadi et al. (2026), who identified delegitimation strategies against political figures on YouTube. Furthermore, the marginalisation of victims through genericisation and passive constructions observed in this study echoes the eco-destructive discourse found by Suhandano et al. (2025), where the media tended to conceal the palm oil companies in the discourse of forest fires. ultimately, while previous studies have examined varying degrees of framing, this study demonstrates a systematic use of rationalisation and authorisation to naturalise government authority, shifting the discourse from ecological causes to a coordinated, professional disaster response.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This paper aims to investigate social actors and the legitimation strategies in news reporting of the 2025 Sumatra floods. Based on the corpus-based analysis, Indonesian media constructs floods as a discourse that favours state legitimacy. The use of functionalisation and nomination referring to government agencies articulates the heroisation of the government. The salient active material verbs and collocations of other government agencies highlight the government as the primary, coordinated, and capable social actor in disaster management. This heroisation discourse is achieved through three main legitimation strategies, namely rationalisation, authorisation, and moral evaluation. In contrast, the victims are genericised and passivised, portrayed as beneficiaries or recipients of government aid. The discourse shifts public focus from the systemic causes of the floods, such as deforestation, to the government's immediate, visible actions. This strategy articulates the reproduction of the existing dominant ideology.

Based on the findings, some recommendations are proposed. Mass media can employ a more ecological language by voicing individual survivors, including their needs, challenges, and perspectives on environmental justice. In addition, rather than focusing solely on the heroic aftermath of disaster, news reports should scrutinise the link between government policy, industry regulations, and ecological disasters. Doing so will balance the representation of actors. Given that this study involved only one newspaper, future studies can expand the corpus by including other newspapers with the same or different ideologies. In addition, future research can conduct a multimodal discourse analysis to expand the analysis from the visual perspective. Doing so will enrich studies of disaster reporting.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly for grammar checking and language refinement. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and revised the text as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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