

# Government Propaganda at the Peace Action on September 1, 2025 in Lampung: Between Image Management and Discourse Control

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This study analyzes the form and strategy of government propaganda in constructing the narrative of the 'most peaceful demonstration in Indonesia' during the September 1, 2025 protest in Lampung. Using Agenda Setting and Uses and Gratification theories, this study reveals how the government and media shaped a dominant 'peaceful' narrative that diverted public attention from the demonstrators' substantive demands. The findings indicate that the propaganda operated on two levels: agenda-setting through media framing and audience gratification through emotional and social engagement on social media. This dual dynamic shows that digital propaganda is not only a top-down process but also involves active public participation that reinforces government narratives.

**Keywords:** Propaganda, Agenda Setting, Uses and Gratification, Lampung

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## 1. Introduction

Propaganda within the context of political communication has long been recognized as an inherent strategy in the exercise of power. Lasswell (1927) defines propaganda as the management of collective attitudes through the manipulation of significant symbols, emphasizing its central role in shaping public perception and political legitimacy. Since classical and modern state formations, propaganda has been employed as an instrument to direct public opinion, construct political narratives, and maintain authority in accordance with the interests of those in power. Ellul (1965) further argues that propaganda is not merely a tool of persuasion, but a systemic process embedded in social structures, designed to integrate individuals into a dominant political logic. In this sense, propaganda has never been neutral; it functions as a mechanism of symbolic control that aligns public consciousness with political objectives.

In the digital era, however, propaganda practices have undergone a significant transformation. The rise of social media platforms has shifted propaganda from a centralized, linear communication model into a multidimensional, interactive, and algorithm-driven process. According to Castells (2009), power in the network society is increasingly exercised through communication networks that shape meaning in the public sphere. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X (Twitter) have become primary arenas for the production, circulation, and contestation of political discourse, where narratives are not only disseminated by political elites but also amplified, negotiated, and legitimized by users. In this environment, propaganda evolves into a form of symbolic communication that relies heavily on visual imagery, emotional appeal, and narrative framing to influence public interpretation and engagement.

The phenomenon of digital propaganda in Indonesia reflects a broader shift from conventional propaganda models that emphasized direct information control toward more subtle strategies of perception management. As noted by Bennett and Livingston (2018), contemporary political communication increasingly operates through strategic narratives that shape how events are interpreted rather than

explicitly instructing audiences what to think. Government institutions and local political actors no longer function solely as message senders, but actively orchestrate public interaction through hashtags, viral content, influencer engagement, and emotionally charged visuals. This demonstrates that modern propaganda works through the construction of social meaning and agenda control in the digital realm, rather than through overt ideological messaging alone.

Within the local Indonesian context, the September 1, 2025 demonstration in Lampung presents a compelling case for examining digital propaganda practices. The event quickly became widely known as the “most peaceful demonstration in Indonesia,” a narrative that spread rapidly across social media platforms. Local government accounts, regional online media, and influencers played a significant role in reinforcing this peaceful image through repetitive framing, visual documentation, and symbolic representations of harmony and dialogue. The active display of the Governor and members of the Regional Leadership Coordination Forum (Forkopimda) engaging directly with demonstrators further strengthened the impression of openness, democracy, and responsive governance. According to Entman (1993), such framing processes highlight certain aspects of reality while obscuring others, guiding audiences toward specific interpretations.

However, the dominant emphasis on peace and order also carries the potential to marginalize or obscure the substantive demands raised by the community, including critical issues related to agrarian conflicts, education, and tax policy. This reflects what Habermas (1989) describes as a distortion of the public sphere, where communicative action is replaced by strategic communication aimed at maintaining legitimacy rather than fostering genuine deliberation. The construction of a peaceful demonstration narrative, while seemingly positive, may function as a discourse control mechanism that redirects public attention away from structural grievances and policy debates.

This phenomenon illustrates a paradox inherent in political communication practices: propaganda serves simultaneously as a tool for building a positive image and legitimizing power, while also operating as a mechanism for controlling discourse and setting the limits of public discussion. Therefore, analyzing how the narrative of “peaceful demonstrations” is constructed, circulated, and normalized on social media becomes crucial to understanding the dynamics of digital propaganda at the local level.

This study approaches the phenomenon through the theoretical frameworks of Agenda Setting and Uses and Gratification. Agenda Setting theory, as proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), explains how media and political institutions influence public priorities by emphasizing certain issues over others, thereby shaping what is perceived as important in public discourse. Meanwhile, Uses and Gratification theory, articulated by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), provides insight into why audiences actively consume, share, and reinforce particular narratives that satisfy their cognitive, emotional, and social needs. By integrating these two perspectives, this study aims to reveal the relationship between government-led production of political messages and the active role of the public in accepting and amplifying digital propaganda narratives within the context of the Lampung demonstration.

## 2. Framework Analysis

This study uses two main theories as a conceptual foundation, namely Agenda Setting Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory. These two theories complement each other in explaining how digital propaganda works not only in terms of message production by governments and the media, but also in terms of audience acceptance and participation in reinforcing the narrative that is constructed.

## Agenda Setting Theory

The Agenda Setting theory developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) departs from the assumption that the media is not always able to tell the public what they should think, but the media can influence what issues are considered important to think about. In other words, the media has the power to determine the priority of issues in the public space.

In the context of the September 1, 2025 demonstration in Lampung, this theory explains how the mainstream media and the government's digital channels systematically highlight the narrative of peace and order. Instead of discussing the 13 substantive demands put forward by the masses such as agrarian, education, and tax issues the news focused more on the positive image of a government that was "open to dialogue" and "succeeded in maintaining regional stability". This process shows that propaganda is carried out through the arrangement of the public agenda, where the issue of "peace" is placed as the main theme that masks the essence of the people's demands.

In addition, the power of social media algorithms also strengthens the effect of agenda setting. Content that contains a positive narrative about "peaceful demonstrations" gets more engagement and visibility than content critical of government policies. This signifies that digital propaganda works not only through editorial control, but also through algorithmic mechanisms that reinforce messages according to the dominant agenda.

## Teori Uses and Gratification

The theory of Uses and Gratification introduced by Blumler and Katz (1974) emphasizes that audiences are not passive recipients of media messages, but rather active users who choose and interpret content according to their psychological and social needs. This theory identifies five main categories of gratification: cognitive (knowledge), affective (emotion), integrative personal (identity), social integrative (sense of community), and escapism (entertainment or escape).

The application of this theory to the case of the "peaceful demonstration" in Lampung shows that people use social media not only to get information, but also to build social identity and regional pride. For example, many netizens re-shared the content of peaceful actions accompanied by a proud narrative of being a "peace-loving" Lampung resident. This shows that the propaganda of "peaceful demonstrations" derives its strength not only from the production of messages by the government, but also from the active involvement of the public in spreading and enjoying the narrative.

Thus, the theory of Uses and Gratification helps explain why digital propaganda can be widely accepted without coercion. The public feels that they derive emotional and social satisfaction from participating in the narrative a form of voluntary propaganda participation that reinforces the legitimacy of political messages.

## 3. Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the government's digital propaganda practices in shaping the narrative of the "most peaceful demonstration in Indonesia" during the September 1, 2025 demonstration in Lampung. This approach was selected because it enables researchers to interpret meanings, symbols, and communication strategies utilized by political actors and the media within complex social contexts.

The research design is a qualitative descriptive analysis that focuses on interpreting texts, narratives, and symbols circulating across social media platforms as well as mainstream media reports. Rather than testing

hypotheses, this approach seeks to explore the processes and meanings underlying the construction of propaganda narratives. The primary object of this research is the digital narrative surrounding the September 1, 2025 peaceful action as presented through public communication channels, particularly social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X (Twitter), along with reports from local online media including Lampung Post, Kupastuntas.co, and Lampung Geh.

Data for this study were obtained through digital documentation and a review of secondary literature. Primary data were collected from observations of digital content, including social media uploads, hashtags, public comments, and posts from official local government and local media accounts that framed the event as a "peaceful demonstration." Secondary data consisted of news articles, online media reports, and academic publications and journals addressing issues of digital propaganda and local political communication. The data collection process employed a content mapping method aimed at identifying narrative patterns, dominant themes, and symbolic representations present in social media content related to the event.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis combined with critical discourse interpretation. This process involved reducing data by selecting content and narratives relevant to the research focus, followed by thematic categorization that grouped content into themes such as peace narratives, government imagery, and community responses. The categorized data were then interpreted theoretically using Agenda Setting theory to examine how media set and emphasized certain issues, alongside Uses and Gratification theory to explain the active role of audiences in reinforcing and disseminating the constructed narrative.

To ensure the validity of the research findings, triangulation of both sources and theories was applied. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing data derived from social media platforms, online news outlets, and official government documents. Theoretical triangulation was achieved by validating the findings through two primary theoretical frameworks Agenda Setting and Uses and Gratification to maintain consistency and objectivity in interpretation.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### Narrative Context "Peaceful Demonstration in Indonesia"

The September 1, 2025 demonstration in Lampung became an interesting momentum in the dynamics of local political communication. This action was attended by around 2,000 participants consisting of students, civil society, and online motorcycle taxi drivers, with 13 demands ranging from agrarian issues, education, to regional taxes. However, what is the center of public attention is not the content of the demands, but the image of the action which is considered "peaceful, orderly, and civilized".

This narrative is built through collaboration between local governments, local media, and a number of influencers. The official account of the Lampung Provincial Government, together with online media such as Kupastuntas.co and *Lampung Geh*, highlights the visualization of peace and dialogue between the Governor of Lampung and the mass action. Various uploads with hashtags such as #DemoTerdamai and #LampungCintaDamai spread widely on TikTok and Instagram, forming a collective impression that Lampung has succeeded in presenting a "new model of peaceful democracy" in Indonesia.

However, this narrative construction is ambivalent. On the one hand, it reinforces the positive image of local governments as a symbol of political stability, but on the other hand, it also has the potential to mask the substance of public demands. This shows that digital propaganda works through a symbolic mechanism that shifts the public's focus from *a substantive issue* to *an image issue*.

### Digital Propaganda Forms and Strategies

Analysis of social media content and news reports shows three main strategies of government propaganda in this event:

1. Framing Citra Damai (Symbolic Reinforcement)  
Local governments consistently highlight visuals and narratives that emphasize order, empathy, and the government's success in maintaining a conducive atmosphere. For example, the video upload of the Governor's meeting with students is packed with a background of calm music and captions that emphasize the value of dialogue. This strategy reinforces the positive association between government and peace.
2. Reproduction of Messages Through Local Influencers  
Influencers and local public figures also become agents to reinforce propaganda messages by redistributing peaceful action content accompanied by messages of regional pride. This collaboration expands the reach of the message while adding social legitimacy to the narrative that is built.
3. Narrative Control and Digital Moderation  
Based on media reports (*Independent, 2025*), security forces traced 172 social media accounts deemed to be spreading invitations to provocative demonstrations, and three of them were secured. This step shows the control of digital discourse to keep the "peaceful" narrative dominant in online public spaces.  
The three strategies show that digital propaganda in the local context functions not only as a tool of political persuasion, but also as a mechanism for managing public perception packaged in visual and emotional communication formats.

### Analysis Based on Agenda Setting Theory and Uses and Gratification

Within the framework of Agenda Setting Theory, the results of the study show that social media and mainstream media play a major role in determining the focus of public issues. The issue of "peace" is placed as the main agenda, replacing the substance of the people's demands. The media and the government consciously chose to highlight a peaceful and dialogical narrative so that the public would judge this event as a political success, not a criticism of policy. This describes a subtle form of control over public opinion through the selection and prominence of certain issues.

Meanwhile, from the perspective of the Uses and Gratification Theory, the Lampung public seems to be active in accepting and strengthening the propaganda. Netizens find emotional and social satisfaction in participating in the "peaceful demonstration" narrative. They express regional pride, build a positive identity as a peace-loving society, and gain social recognition in the digital space. Thus, the public is not just an object of propaganda, but also a subject that actively helps reproduce the message.

Public involvement in spreading the "peaceful" narrative is showing a new dynamic in the practice of digital propaganda not just top-down from government to society, but collaborative and participatory. The public becomes part of the propaganda system itself, making propaganda more effective and difficult to critically identify.

### Implications of the Findings

These findings confirm that digital propaganda at the local level works through two main mechanisms: first, agenda-setting by the media and governments; second, the internalization of messages by the public that derive social and emotional satisfaction from the narrative. The combination of the two forms a mutually reinforcing cycle of political communication in which propaganda is no longer perceived as a tool of power, but as part of collective pride.

## 5. Conclusion

The phenomenon of digital propaganda in the September 1, 2025 demonstration in Lampung popularly known as the "peaceful demonstration in Indonesia" shows that the practice of political communication in the digital era has transformed from a top-down model to a participatory and symbolic model. Local governments use structured communication strategies to frame the image of peace, while the public plays an active role in disseminating and reinforcing these narratives through social media.

The analysis with the theory of Agenda Setting shows how the media and the government determine the priority of issues by raising the image of "peace" as the main focus, so that the substance of the community's demands becomes a secondary issue. Meanwhile, the theory of Uses and Gratification explains why the public accepts and even amplifies the propaganda because peaceful narratives provide emotional, social, and positive identity gratification for the people of Lampung.

This digital propaganda that emerged from the synergy between power, the media, and the public shows a new face of local political communication in Indonesia: more subtle, collaborative, and emotion-based. Although it is able to build a positive image of the region and strengthen the legitimacy of the government, this practice also leaves ambivalence, because the potential for blurring the substance of people's aspirations remains behind the packaging of a soothing image.

This research emphasizes that digital propaganda cannot be understood solely as a form of information manipulation, but as an arena for negotiating meaning between political actors and society. Therefore, stronger media literacy is needed so that the public is able to distinguish between constructive political communication and propaganda that controls discourse.

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