

Interpretive case study to understand online communication in an e-tendering project implementation

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ABSTRACT

The presence of social media has encouraged the merger of online communication between the government and the community. This phenomenon provides an opportunity for researchers to simultaneously understand the process of government communication online and offline by using an interpretive case study approach. This study aims to demonstrate the use of a qualitative interpretive case study approach to explain the effectiveness of local government communication with local business people in the online context regarding implementing the e-tendering system. This study used a qualitative interpretive method. We conducted both offline and online research to compare the consistency of the data in our study. Using the case study of government and contractors' communication in implementing e-tendering in a regency in South Sulawesi, we gathered data through face-to-face interviews and observed online communication on social media. This study's results indicate an inconsistency in government communication between the online and offline contexts regarding the perception of e-tendering issues. Our findings can be used to increase our understanding of the government's communication strategy with local business people in an online and offline context. Our study also shows that using new media in qualitative interpretive studies can reduce challenges in participant recruitment and access to research sites. However, our study faced challenges on ethical issues regarding communication material shared on social media. Future studies should focus on how ethical issues can be reduced.

Keywords: Communication effectiveness; e-tendering; interpretive study; research paradigm; social media

Studi kasus interpretatif untuk memahami komunikasi online dalam implementasi proyek e-tender

ABSTRAK

Hadirnya media sosial telah mendorong terjadinya komunikasi secara online antara pihak pemerintah dengan masyarakat. Fenomena ini memberikan peluang bagi para peneliti untuk memahami proses komunikasi pemerintah di ranah online dan juga offline sekaligus dengan menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus interpretatif. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendemonstrasikan penggunaan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif interpretatif dalam menjelaskan efektivitas komunikasi pemerintah daerah dengan pengusaha lokal. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif interpretive. Kami melakukan penelitian offline dan online secara bersamaan untuk membandingkan konsistensi data dalam penelitian. Penelitian menggunakan studi kasus komunikasi pemerintah dan kontraktor dalam penerapan e-tender di sebuah kabupaten di Sulawesi Selatan. Data dikumpul melalui wawancara mendalam secara tatap muka dan juga mengamati diskusi online di media sosial. Kami menggunakan paradigma kualitatif interpretatif untuk menggambarkan bagaimana wawancara tatap muka yang mendalam dan pertukaran informasi di situs media sosial dapat digunakan sebagai sarana untuk memahami efektivitas komunikasi pemerintah dalam penerapan e-tendering. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa terdapat inkonsistensi komunikasi pemerintah antara ranah online dan konteks offline terkait persepsi terhadap berbagai isu terkait e-tendering. Namun, temuan kami dapat digunakan sebagai sarana untuk meningkatkan pemahaman kita tentang komunikasi pemerintah dengan pengusaha lokal dalam konteks online dan offline. Penelitian kami juga menunjukkan bahwa pemanfaatan media baru dalam penelitian interpretatif dapat memudahkan dalam memilih informan, akses ke lokasi penelitian, dan mencegah bias dalam wawancara. Namun, penelitian kami menghadapi tantangan pada masalah etika mengenai materi komunikasi yang dibagikan di media sosial. Penelitian lain di masa depan harus fokus pada bagaimana masalah etika dapat dikurangi.

Kata-kata kunci: Efektivitas komunikasi; e-tendering; media sosial; paradigma penelitian; penelitian interpretatif

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social media has supported massive online communication through online networks or groups. Social media users exchange information in texts, images, and videos, which can be a rich source of data for positivist and interpretive researchers. This phenomenon has encouraged scholars to move their research into new spheres and gather data with new approaches. Scholars with a positivist paradigm have intensively utilized this new online space to gather data with various techniques such as online surveys (Abdulhamid, Ayoun, Kashefi, & Sigweni, 2021; Gordon & McNew, 2008) and email (Wattal, Telang, Mukhopadhyay, & Boatwright, 2012; Wright & Schwager, 2008). On the other hand, scholars with qualitative interpretive paradigms have yet to take many actions in expanding their data-gathering strategies in the online space. They still concentrate on conventional data gathering approaches such as face-to-face interviews (Basch, Melchers, Kurz, Krieger, & Miller, 2021; Myers & Newman, 2007; Vogl, 2013), focus groups discussion (Love, Vetere, & Davis, 2020; Muijeen, Kongvattananon, & Somprasert, 2020), and ethnographic studies (Andreassen, Christensen, & Møller, 2020; Tobin, 2022).

Expanding qualitative data gathering into

online spaces allows scholars with a qualitative interpretive paradigm to obtain rich qualitative data and insight into the population they are studying (Braun, Clarke, Boulton, Davey, & McEvoy, 2021; Cuthbertson, Robb, & Blair, 2020). The population can include participants who are difficult to reach with face-to-face interviews (Cantrell & Lupinacci, 2007), such as participants who live in remote areas or in a conflict environment. In this case, new online space, such as social media, has become a new world that provides opportunities for qualitative researchers to understand online content shared and exchanged by participants. Qualitative interpretive researchers can interpret the online content to deepen their understanding of the studied topic. In this context, interpretive researchers can broaden their understanding of a topic being studied in a new environment created by new technology (Kane & Fichman, 2009).

The use of online space, such as social media, to gather qualitative data can enrich data sources because more alternatives are available (Urquhart & Fernandez, 2013), and it also supports rich triangulation (Farquhar, Michels, & Robson, 2020; Urquhart & Vaast, 2012) to increase our insight on a topic being studied. However, using online space to gather qualitative data by interpretive researchers is limited practice, and most interpretive scholars

lack an understanding of the new data-gathering approach (Vaast & Walsham, 2013).

Online communication is a communication made to exchange information using the Internet or mobile communication networks for various purposes such as information sharing, marketing, and public interaction with the government (Liao et al., 2020; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Meanwhile, online communication has been extensively practiced between individuals or groups through online content sharing and exchanging on many online platforms. Government agencies have also carried out online communication in various public policy implementations. Today's online communication has developed due to the growth of various social media that can facilitate easy and fast communication.

Various online communication studies mention shortcomings, including lack of cues, social construction, social formation, and domestication (Lizzo & Liechty, 2020). However, online communication has made it easier for communicants and communicators to meet in a social network for an unlimited time and without being limited by space (Nurdin, 2017b; Nurdin & Rusli, 2013). Various communication topics can also be shared and discussed easily with various online platforms.

Government communication with their stakeholders in the online space should be

studied to increase our insight regarding how effective the communication is and how the government staff and stakeholders perceive online communication. The finding might benefit both academia and practitioners in the public sector. However, government online communication with their stakeholders, such as businessmen, is rarely studied with a qualitative interpretive approach.

Motivated by the phenomenon, we intend to study how a qualitative interpretative research paradigm can be implemented in an online space to gather rich qualitative data in understanding the effectiveness of an e-tendering implementation in local government at a district level in South Sulawesi. In this study, we combined our data collection with in-depth semi-structured interviews in an offline context to verify our online data.

We argue that through a case study of social media content exchange about an e-tendering project implementation in a local government, we can describe the effectiveness of government online communication on social media with local business stakeholders (Vaast & Walsham, 2013). We can provide in-depth insight into the effectiveness of the local government's communication with their business partners in the online space. The online data can complement the data from face-to-face interviews and observations (Nurdin, 2017a).

RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, we used a qualitative case study approach (Alam, 2021) to study the implementation and use of a local government e-tendering system in a regency in South Sulawesi. Data was gathered with two strategies: online and offline (Smironva, Kiatkawsin, Lee, Kim, & Lee, 2020). This research selected cases of social media discussion, exchange, and distribution of information regarding the implementation and use of e-tendering. Social media has been used to communicate between local business people and the regency e-tendering project committee. The material and information exchanged by the businessmen and local government actors were considered a rich “*digital text*” (Urquhart & Vaast, 2012) to be analyzed in this study. This study’s digital texts focused on overall social media contents (Urquhart & Vaast, 2012) gleaned from Facebook discussions, exchanges, posts, and company blogs.

Communication on social media involves business people and residents. We use social observation to understand stakeholder views on e-tendering use. The case study research method is suitable for understanding phenomena when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clearly defined and require in-depth study (Yin, 2003). Our observation of social

media content was considered rich data sources for our study (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Guidry Moulard, 2020; Hennell, Limmer, & Piacentini, 2020; Sass et al., 2020) and Blogs (Greville-Harris, Smithson, & Karl, 2020; Jenkins & Moreno, 2020; Scheibling, 2020).

We conducted in-depth interviews with nine local government officials from the e-tendering department and another level of the local government hierarchies. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. Collecting data from different levels of the local government organizational hierarchies contributed to drawing more conclusions and providing multiple perspectives (Nurdin, 2017b; Wallace et al., 2021). We also gathered data from the offline context with online data collection.

Meanwhile, online data gathering was intended to understand contractors’ perceptions of the effectiveness of e-tendering use. The online data gathering through social media helped us to increase insight into contractors’ views during their online discussions and information distribution materials related to using the e-tendering system. The results of the online and offline data gathering are shown in table 1.

In data analysis, we followed the thematic analysis method suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The data analysis was carried out through iterative stages; open coding, axial

Table 1 Sources and characteristics of data

The source of data		The types of data	Data access mechanism
Online	We observed Facebook	149 Facebook postings	We observed and captured online content such as texts, images, discussion materials, shared documents, and videos for three months.
	We observed Blog content.	Companies' content Blog such as images, text, and documents	
	In-depth interviews with government staff	We conducted in-depth interviews with nine local government staff from the e-tendering department.	We visited the local government offices twice and verified the data through email and phone calls.
	written documents	We studied the local government's annual reports and regulations regarding the e-tendering project.	Written material collected during the field visit
	E-Tendering website	The content of the E-Tendering website	We accessed the website to complement our offline data
Offline			

Source: Research finding, 2021

coding, and selective coding. In the coding process, we also adopted the process practised by Urqurhart and Vaast (2012), where themes were built based on data that appeared on social media and the researcher's empirical research questions (Vaast & Walsham, 2013).

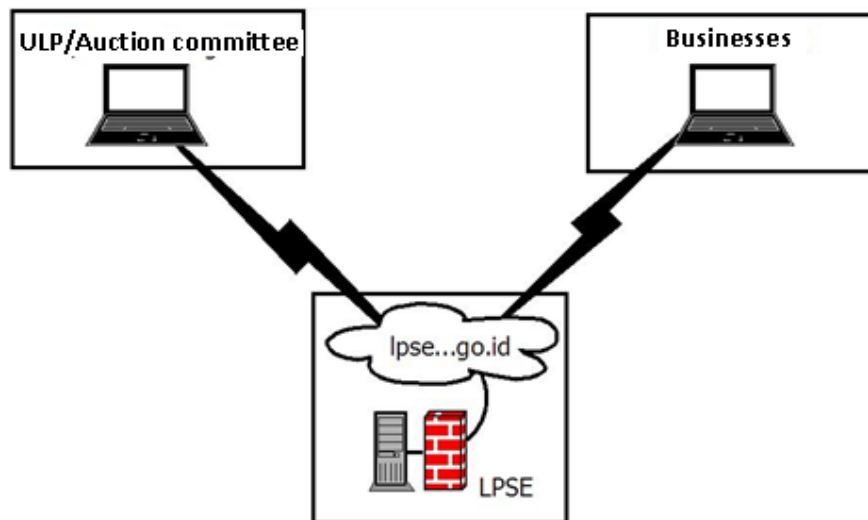
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our findings on the local government communication effectiveness with local contractors in e-tendering use, whether through in-depth face-to-face interviews (offline) or online communication observations, reflected transparent communication. The online communication and distribution of materials on Facebook and company blogs showed different perceptions between local government

officials and contractors regarding e-tendering system use. The communication between local government employees and local business owners was focused on using the e-tendering system or SPSE, managed by the local e-tendering committee or LPSE. The LPSE communication mechanism is shown in figure 1.

During formal face-to-face interviews with several government officials, we found that government officials in the e-tendering department were considered professional and highly skilled, as stated by the following participant.

The e-tendering department staffs are a collection of all people from all accredited agencies in government tendering goods and



Source: Research finding, 2021

Figure 1 SPSE communication mechanism

services. Similarly, the operational officials of the e-tendering system have bachelor's degrees in computer science from reputable universities. We assigned e-tendering department officials to four divisions; tendering of construction, civil construction, and tendering of goods and services according to their expertise (LU1).

The availability of officials from reputable universities has led to professional practices of the official in the e-tendering process where they can reduce errors in all e-tendering processes and complaints from local contractors. However, in our observation of communication on Facebook, we found that the contractors' perceptions of professionalism differed from those of government officials. The contractors' communication on social media showed that they perceived government officials as lack of professionalism in managing the

e-tendering system, as shown in the following communication between contractors and business people below. Their names are shown with initials for personal purposes.

WAD: (a company director) wrote as follows:

WAD: *The project document assessment was unclear, and there was no clear explanation from the e-tendering officials. Do they think they are professional and accredited?*

Conversation:

WAD: *The question is, what is wrong with us? Moreover, why do they disqualify using the tendering?*

YAH: *Send complaints directly to the office ... or slap the tendering committee...*

WAD: *Everything is foggy... beginning from the project documents submission, document assessment process, and projects announcement... everything was unclear!*

YAH: *Yes, everything was like that... experience in another regency was similar too.*

WAD: *That was very strange, Mr YAH... as far as we know, the director of the e-tendering and his officials have been accredited by the Central Government*

Procurement Agency.

Observation result on a local company blog also found a posting that said the local government e-tendering officials had acted unprofessionally in many local government projects' tendering processes. A company employee wrote on his company blogs as follows:

Things we found funnies and lying included: An error occurred: "The officials changed the project budget from the early budget estimation in which the pipes installation of PVC with $\frac{3}{4}$ mm from IDR 708.02 million to 708.20 million rupiahs" Another error also occurred: "The price of PVC pipes with $\frac{3}{4}$ mm was more than 110% of the set price which was IDR 25,000, - / meter to IDR 100,000, - per meter. Our offers and other companies in the same group (CV. TE) were disqualified from tendering process without explanation. They said our proposals resembled a building construction project, not a pipe installation proposal. Why?

The conversation resulted in 57 responses from other business people and citizens. During interviews with government officials, they stated that the regency e-tendering officials had conducted professional practices in every tendering session because all tendering officials graduated from reputable universities and were accredited by Central Government Procurement Agency.

The use of the e-tendering system has become a strategy to increase transparency, eradicate corruption, and gain the trust of contractors and citizens. According to

government informants, e-tendering has built public and companies' confidence in their goods and services tendering. An informant from the government office, during a face-to-face interview, explained the success of e-tendering use as follows:

Eradicating corruption is more than just arresting bribery and corruptors. We must use a system that prevents government officials from breaking the project e-tendering regulation. In addition, at this time, the citizens' trust in government tendering officials has been at the lowest level. Our government officials have regained our almost lost image through the implementation and use of the e-tendering system. (LU1)

Each regency office spends much budget on various local government projects every year. The primary responsibility for budget spending is on the head of the agency, which then forms an auction committee to auction off the project. The realization of local government projects requires the involvement of local citizens and contractors. The previous manual tender system was not transparent, and tender project committees often failed to disclose the bidding process. After the implementation and use of the e-tendering system, the procurement process has become more transparent, and employees are no longer under pressure, as shown in the following comment:

In the past, many companies were dissatisfied with the auction process, and then they often protested to the auction committee because the process was not transparent. Some even came directly to

the office and tried to attack government employees. It causes high psychological pressure on the Electronic Procurement Service Unit and Service Unit of the Auction Committee employees, which affects their performance. Then we thought we had to find a solution to this problem. After the implementation and use of the e-government procurement system, the tender committee received very few complaints from companies, and we were able to work more efficiently (LU3)

Our observations of Facebook posts show that the company and its staff are still dissatisfied with the existing online auction system. They still suspect government officials of collusion and corruption, especially when the tender process is not transparent. There are several inconsistencies, as seen in the online conversations and materials. One Facebook user (WIS) posted the following:

WIS: Announcement of the project tender on June 15 from 3.40 pm until 11.59 pm (but no announcement until June 17 to 09:54 pm). Complaints must be submitted no later than June 18 to June 22 between 08.00 am and 04.00 pm. Who wants to complain ____? Is no winner decided ____ yet?

Conversations between Facebook users:

HUP: I could not think about that... haaa

FES: It was magic tendering.....

WIS: Online projects tendering but with manual style

FES: new rules of the game.... Online tendering but with a manual process

GUZ: Fabricated online tendering.... It was just a camouflage to comply with the rules.

IKL: There was no transparency... there is always a moment to collusion practice. Electronic tendering should be faster and more transparent. However, the e-tendering

system malfunctions had become an excuse.

To make collusion

KAB: a fake e- tendering.....change head of the tendering service.....send him back to his village.....

DOC: that was all a game... I suggested taking a screenshot so we can use it as evidence for the police.

The communication between business people above was by exchanging contract document images on their Facebook pages. The communication also indicated that the online tendering announcements for government projects were not on time which should be published on June 15 to allow bidders to file their complaints by June 18. However, as of June 17 at 21:45 am, the announcement has not yet been published. The bidders did not have sufficient time to respond to the announcement. The inconsistency in the publication of the project announcement increased the company's suspicion of collusion in the e-tendering government project process. The findings also reflect that the local government office has yet to gain its business contractors' trust.

At the early stage of the implementation and use of the e-tendering system, the officials in the e-tendering department began education and transferring knowledge to contractors regarding how to use the system. The contractors' knowledge and skills were improved through several training programs provided by the e-tendering officials. The

local government officials formally assigned their staff to help contractors when interacting with the e-tendering system. During the offline interview, an informant said as follows:

When we started using the e-tendering system, we found that most contractors and their employees did not know how to use the online tendering system and did not know how to interact with it. We provided a computer laboratory to train them in this office. Besides training, our instructors also helped them whenever needed during their involvement in e-tendering activities. Some contractors from other regencies also got support when they wanted to involve in projects' online bidding. Usually, they did not know to register and how to send documents online (LU.3).

The involvement of the local government e-tendering officials in training and knowledge transfer was to maintain sustainable use of the system. However, knowledge sharing also happened during online communication between the government and contractors, as shown in the following conversation. A businessman (RHA) wrote on his Facebook page as follows:

Can a contractor apply for different projects that require different project specification requirements? For example, a company with the specification of construction can bid for a procurement project. It is a project which is worth 966 million and 3.7 billion. Please give suggestions and opinions, friend.

DEY: *(A government official from the e-tendering department): To make clear, you can check the contractor's business license.....*

RHA: *Mr DEY, in my opinion.. a small company can only bid on a small project with a budget of fewer than 3 billion*

rupiahs, while a bigger contractor can apply projects with a higher budget project IBS: I think not like that... I remember government regulation number 20 of 2008 states that companies are permitted to apply for specific projects based on their license criteria. It means a company can only apply projects according to human resource criteria. For example, when a company employee is qualified to undertake a construction project, they are only permitted to apply for that type of project. So look at the contractor permit. Do they have a construction permit or procurement permit?

ALI: *(e-tendering official) The sixth verse in the second paragraph of the tendering regulation clearly states that a company is only permitted to bid on a project according to their license and human and technical competence, and also the company capital and equipment. The size of the project they apply for does not affect their permit to the bid project. When a company is eligible, the tendering committee cannot disqualify the company from bidding.*

The government e-tendering official (ALI) is involved in online communication to increase the contractors' knowledge of e-tendering regulations. The contractors were informed that a company with a specific license could only apply for a project based on their license. Online communication reflects an online two-ways communication in a virtual moment that can be used to clarify and make clear a specific message relating to a government policy implementation.

As stated in the early part of this paper that the objective of this paper is to demonstrate how a case study with a qualitative interpretive

paradigm in a study that combines online and offline data gathering on social media can be utilized to improve our understanding of a topic being studied, in this study, we demonstrated how the government's online communication with contractors effectively communicated through e-tendering policy implementation.

The themes found in this study showed different insights on e-tendering implementation effectiveness between offline interview data and online communication observation. Suppose we believe that data from social media communication was accurate and true. In that case, we can conclude that there was a difference in perception between government officials and contractors toward e-tendering effectiveness. However, informants interviewed in an offline context may have provided factual information about the e-tendering phenomenon. However, the government informants may be under pressure during the offline interview session, which means that the interview might occur at a highly complex moment due to certain situations (Myers & Newman, 2007). As such, the findings might lead to a lack of descriptive validity or factual accuracy of the research topic being explored (Johnson, 1997), meaning what the government informants said during face-to-face interviews may not reflect the actual reality.

The above findings justified the view that face-to-face interviews could be problematic

because participants might only want to please researchers and want the interview sessions last soon (Bauer & Jovchelovitch, 2000). In other conditions, a research participant may also say something that meets the researcher's expectations (Kleinknecht, 2007). Face-to-face interviews may also cause informants to experience low cognitive and emotional feelings because interactions with researchers may not be in a comfortable time and environment. As such, the information communicated by the informants may be caused less accuracy compared to reality (Lanz, Sorgente, & Danes, 2020).

The challenges can be reduced when interpretive research is conducted online on social media. We argue that obtaining information from an online space allows participants to express opinions freely through the distribution of information in the online space (Chen, Liu, Chang, Wang, & Luo, 2020; Lloyd, Sallis, Verplanken, Haase, & Munafò, 2020). In an online context, informants on social media are not challenged with pressures of face-to-face interaction conditions, such as time limitations, that reduce informants' cognitive to express their opinions. In addition, in the online space, the informants can freely communicate data in various digital formats such as texts, images, and videos (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, & Pessach, 2009). As such, researchers can

observe phenomena being studied in a more natural setting, increasing the data integrity in an interpretive case study (Cresswell, 1998).

Meanwhile, in research in a conventional context, a researcher may experience a lack of freedom and transparency in observing all ongoing phenomena. In contrast, research in social media provides ongoing access to past and ongoing online data (Vaast & Walsham, 2013). For example, the experience of researchers has proven that researchers can access data from social media in the past, as was done by Susarla et al. (2012). During the observation period, the researcher repeatedly visited previous and ongoing Facebook threads and company Blog content as Vaast & Walsham (2013) proposed to build the researcher's conceptual understanding.

Conducting research in an online space also allows a researcher to observe and analyze more discussion texts, images, and online documents distributed by informants, which can increase a researcher's insight on studied topics. Similarly, the theme developed in this study came from analyzing all types of online data, including conversation text, photos, and images of the document shared by local contractors on social media sites. At the same time, we also practiced online data coding as soon as we obtained the data from the e-tendering users' communication threads on social media as practiced by previous researchers (Nelimarkka, Laaksonen, Tuokko,

& Valkonen, 2020).

Researchers have used triangulation to validate a study's data and results by combining and comparing the source of data, method, and informants (Minger, 2001, p. 244). Previous studies (for example, Farquhar et al., 2020; Lloyd et al., 2020) posit that triangulation can produce validity in a study by consistency across data sources and methods. Another researcher argues that a lack of consistency in data and method reduce the validity or trustworthiness of evidence in a study. However, Patton (1990) argues that inconsistency can be used as an opportunity to deepen researchers' insight into a phenomenon being studied.

The findings of this study support both of those arguments. We found that the differences in findings can be used for triangulation to validate and deepen our insight into the e-tendering system implementation effectiveness. Digital data from social media sites were used to compare findings from offline and online environments. Our validation strategy is considered as triangulation of data from a different environment, which "involves the use of multiple locations, devices, and other key factors related to the environment in which the research takes place" (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011). We observed informants communicating face-to-face and virtual to understand the use of the e-tendering system.

Having this strategy, Sarker & Sahay (2004) argue that the research process may become more complex because of the overlapping data obtained from the two environments. However, the overlapping provides an opportunity for data triangulation from 'virtual' and 'offline contexts to build more insight.

Online media also supports data triangulation because researchers can access data from various social media sites, such as Facebook and Blogs. Then the researchers triangulate the similarities and differences between the data from Facebook and Blog sites (Aggarwal, Gopal, Sankaranarayanan, & Singh, 2012). For example, data from Facebook can be used to validate data from Blogs and vice versa. As such, the researchers get great opportunities to produce consistency between the findings.

Based on the first and the second themes discussed above. The data from social media is different from offline data, where government officials and contractors have different perceptions of professionalism and collusion. In that case, the difference can be used as a medium to deepen insight into the studied topic, as argued by Patton (1990) and Olsen (2004). The inconsistency of the informants' opinions can lead to new insights, which require further studies to understand how the differences occurred and how the findings contribute to the body of knowledge and practices.

CONCLUSION

The effectiveness of government communication with stakeholders regarding policy implementation can be investigated with an interpretive research paradigm. The combination of data from different environments, offline and online, becomes a rich data source to increase the trustworthiness of a qualitative case study. We argue that data from online sources might have become more trustworthy than data obtained from the face-to-face interview because, during an offline interview, informants may be under pressure to respond to questions asked by a researcher. We also have demonstrated that data from social media can be used to deepen insight on e-tendering use and the effectiveness of government communication in an online and offline context. Our study provides other researchers to expand their data collection to an online context and use it as a triangulation medium. Data from online sources can also be used as a complement to data from offline contexts to enrich findings. Carrying out a study in an online and offline context can reduce limitations and challenges when a study is carried out offline, such as recruiting informants and demanding access to written material. However, the biggest challenge is ethical issues regarding communication material shared in

online space. Future studies should focus on how to deal with ethical issues.

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