

Dedi Mulyadi's Populism in Building Political Communication Through Social Media Content

Alfin Aldiansyah*, Muhammad Ruslan Ramli

Universitas Esa Unggul, Indonesia

Email: Alfinaldiansyah@gmail.com*

Keywords	Abstract
social media, Tiktok, populism, politics.	This research discusses the populism displayed by KDM or Dedi Mulyadi through social media TikTok, as well as how the public responds to it. KDM actively uses social media as a way to build personal branding. The problem is how the form of populism displayed by Dedi Mulyadi in Tiktok content, and how the public responds to it. The goal is to explain the form of populism used on TikTok's social media, and the public's response to it. This study uses the Populism Theory from Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser and the Reception Theory from Stuart Hall, with the method of Critical Discourse Analysis or AWK. The paradigm uses constructivism with critical discourse analysis techniques. The analysis focuses on four category clusters, namely Politics, Social, and Family. Analysis was carried out on Dedi Mulyadi's content in one period, and interviews were conducted with people from various backgrounds. The results found that Dedi Mulyadi adheres to moralistic, cultural, and personal populism, namely populism. who consciously build personal and moral closeness. Then it was also found that three of the six speakers with a percentage of fifty percent chose to be in the Negotiated position or agreed with several notes on the way carried out by Dedi Mulyadi.



INTRODUCTION

Digitalization and social media are present like a flood that cannot be stopped by anyone, social media itself has basically become one of the media in communication that greatly affects human life today. Digitalization is the process of changing the process of delivering information from the previous traditional to a process with a digital format with the help of electronic media, for a wider reach with new opportunities (Castells, 2011; Katz & Aakhus, 2002). The word social media basically refers to an online platform that opens up new opportunities for humans to be able to create, share, and exchange information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression through networks and virtual communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Along with the development of technology, the functions of social media today can be further expanded and not limited to just sharing personal content. Social media is now also used as a means for marketing activities, political campaigns, social advocacy, and even as a branding tool for individuals and institutions (Nadia Edawarma et al., 2025). In the field of politics in particular, social media is a strategic tool that is often used in the context of

building self-image or personal branding, spreading political narratives, and strengthening direct relationships with audiences without conventional barriers.

The use of social media in Indonesia itself has increased rapidly. Based on reports from We Are Social and Kepios, internet users in Indonesia at the beginning of 2025 will reach 215 million people, with social media access of 50.2% of the total population (Kemp, 2025), with platforms like Tiktok being the main and largest channel for this interaction activity. There are so many cross-disciplinary figures who have proven the power of social media in building audiences, ranging from celebrities, athletes, businessmen, to politicians. Some of the big names that have been widely known by the public such as Raffi Ahmad with a total of 76.1 million followers, Baim Wong with a total of 21.6 million followers, Jerome Polin with a total of 9 million followers, Gita Savitri with a total of 931 thousand followers, Deddy Corbuzier with a total of 12.3 million followers, Raditya Dika with a total of 22.2 million followers, Ganjar Pranowo with a total of 6.4 million followers, and Armuji with a total of 159 thousand followers.

Its rapid development has also created a new phenomenon in the political world of the country. Some Indonesian politicians today are not only preoccupied with competition in party lines and mainstream media, they are now also required to build a mass base in this digital media. One of the real examples of this phenomenon is a politician named Dedi Mulyadi, he is seen actively using social media in the form of TikTok under the username dedimulyadiofficial, to build an image as a small people's leader using a very structured and consistent populism strategy.

Through an account with a number of 6 million followers, a frequency of 5-8 new content per day with the theme of closeness with the people, a Dedi Mulyadi or who is also familiarly called KDM, not only attended and presented himself as a contemporary politician. He is consistently present with the narrative of "small people", using typical Sundanese traditional clothes, and often goes directly to the community to solve various social problems using such a dramatic way. Using the online platform Tiktok, the politician, who is familiarly called KDM, uploads at least 5-8 videos per day and often displays various social actions that are very touching. Some of the viral videos uploaded by him are the action of dismantling illegal buildings on state land, helping elderly scavengers, cracking down on prostitution places, to buying all the goods of a cracker seller and paying off his debts. These contents are accompanied by the use of populist symbols such as Iket Sunda, the use of regional languages, and the framing of actions that state that the things that appear are personal desires and are done spontaneously.

From the perspective of communication science, the phenomenon carried out by Dedi Mulyadi provides an example of what it would be like if social media is strategically used as a production space for political meaning and identity (Triantoro, 2020). In the political communication studio, it is even stated that social media is not only seen as a channel to convey messages, but social media is also described as a symbolic arena where politicians can freely build narratives, play cultural symbols, and even control public perception directly (Hardianto & Pribadi, 2024). Dedi Mulyadi formed a strategic communication that mixed elements of populism, action visualization, and digital storytelling to create a self-image that could be recognized by the audience. The activities carried out by these politicians make

populism no longer present as a rhetoric, because it appears and is used as a political branding instrument that runs systematically through digital media.

However, communication in the context of political contestation in social media cannot only stop at the production process and delivery of messages. Various messages formed and sent by political actors will always be faced with audiences who always play an active role in terms of imposing, interpreting, negotiating, or even rejecting the messages conveyed by these political actors. Therefore, in order to be able to understand the phenomenon of the use of populism in the digital space to the maximum, it is necessary to have an analysis process that not only the form and character of populism displayed by communicators, but also discoveries related to how the public who play the role of communicators can respond to and interpret the populism communication style displayed.

The formulation of the problem in this study is how the form of populism displayed by Dedi Mulyadi in his Tiktok content, and how the public's reception of the populist style displayed by Dedi Mulyadi in Tiktok content. With the aim of identifying and analyzing the populism strategy used by Dedi Mulyadi in the process of building an image as a leader who is so close to the small people through the use of various social media platforms, and analyzing the public reception related to the populism style used by Dedi Mulyadi on his various Tiktok content, based on what is interpreted by the communicator.

This research offers both theoretical and practical benefits. Theoretically, it contributes to communication science by integrating Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's populism theory with Stuart Hall's reception theory and Teun A. van Dijk's critical discourse analysis, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding digital populism in the Indonesian political context. Practically, the findings provide insights for political actors in developing effective communication strategies on platforms like TikTok, offer critical awareness for the public and media observers in interpreting political content, and serve as a reference for policymakers and election supervisory bodies in understanding digital political communication dynamics and their implications for democratic processes. Additionally, this research contributes to the growing literature on digital populism in Southeast Asia for future comparative studies.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research will use qualitative research methods, critical discourse analysis as a way to be able to understand social reality as an arena for power betting and domination based on the use of language (Van Dijk, T. A, 2015). This research method was chosen based on the purpose of the research which is not to measure, test hypotheses, or produce statistical generalizations. This research aims to be able to reveal fundamentally how Dedi Mulyadi can form and run a communication based on the image of the people (Schreier, 2012). By applying this approach, it will be possible for research to be able to analyze the social reality constructed through a communication practice, especially in the context of populism used by Dedi Mulyadi. The theories used in this study are the Mudde and Kaltwasser theory of populism, the Critical Discourse Analysis by AWK is Teun A. van Dijk, and the theory of Reception proposed by Stuart Hall.

Primary data can be defined as a main data obtained directly from the subject or object of research (Sulung & Muspawi, 2024). In this study, primary data will be obtained through

Dedi Mulyadi's digital content documentation in the period 1-31 March 2025, as well as the interview process with various informants who are representatives of the community as the audience of Dedi Mulyadi's content. Secondary data is a data obtained through publications or written media that does not directly come from the research subject (Sugiyono, 2013; Arianto & Handayani, 2024), this secondary data serves as supporting data. In this study, secondary data will be obtained through several channels such as news and online media articles, scientific journals and research reports, and public comments and responses on the internet. In this study, the validity and reliability of the data will be maintained through a discussion process with related parties, to checking the consistency of the answers given by the sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During March 2025, KDM or Dedi Mulyadi consistently uploaded 3-5 new video content every day, for a total of 172 video content in the period of March 1-31, 2025 alone. This amount was obtained after going through a thorough data scraping process, as well as a data validation process within 1 week.

Through various videos that have been shared, 4 main categories appear that can be seen from each content, these categories are a form of operationalization derived from the concept of populism Cas Mudde.

Table 1. Operationalization of Cas Mudde's Populism Concept in Dedi Mulyadi's TikTok Content

MAIN CONCEPTS OF CAS MUDDÉ	CONCEPTUAL DIMENSIONS	OPERATIONALIZATION EMPIRICAL	NARRATIVE EXAMPLES
The Dichotomy of the People VS Elite	The people are positioned as the main subjects	Citizenship	Dedi Mulyadi visited the community directly, to solve problems personally
People's Representation Claims	Politics becomes a moral articulation	Politics	Dedi Mulyadi threw criticism at public officials who were considered impartial to the people
Populism as a <i>thin-centered ideology</i>	Flexibility to context	Social	Dedi Mulyadi provides assistance to victims affected by the disaster
Personalize Leadership	Leaders become figures like humans in general.	Family	Dedi Mulyadi showed figures / videos of gentlemen who are always active in working even though it is hot.

Source: Processed primary data from Dedi Mulyadi's TikTok content analysis, March 2025

The main categories that appear have different percentages from each other. Democracy with a total of 82 videos or 47.7%. Second is Politics with a total of 56 videos or 32.6%. Third is social with a total of 30 videos or 17.4%. And the fourth is Family with a total of 9 Videos or 5.2%.

Table 2. Frequency Distribution of Dedi Mulyadi's TikTok Content Categories (March 1-31, 2025)

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Citizenship	82	47,67
Politics	56	32,56
Social	30	17,44
Family	9	5,23
Total	172	100%

Source: Processed primary data from Dedi Mulyadi's TikTok content analysis, March 2025

Based on the data that appeared, it can be seen that most of the content that has been shared by Dedi Mulyadi through his TikTok account has a tendency to have a narrative in the Popular category. This Popular Content itself can be explained as content that shows direct interaction between a figure, with the community or its audience. In addition, the People's Party also displays the action of executing practical solutions to a problem, as well as giving an emphasis that a figure/leader will always be present close to his people.

Based on various data findings taken directly from Dedi Mulyadi's personal TikTok account, in the period of March 2025. It can be concluded that the type of populism embraced by Dedi Mulyadi is a populist populism that does not give rise to conflicts between the people and the elite sharply. Populism in this category prefers to display morality, emotional closeness, Sundanese cultural identity, and direct action to the community on the ground. This type of populism is also very much in line with the characteristics of the social media platform TikTok, where it prioritizes visuals, action, and emotional short narratives.

In terms of public reception, the process uses data obtained through the interview process with informants from various backgrounds, namely academics, journalists, social media activists, civil society organizations, students, and the general public. Each interview that has been conducted is analyzed and drawn into a category in one of the three reading positions of Stuart Hall, namely dominant/hegemonic reading, negotiated reading, and oppositional reading.

The Dominant / Hegemonic category is by definition a condition when the audience that plays the role of a communicator can capture and receive messages in line with what the communicator wants. In this study, the Dominant reading was seen to emerge from the audience of young people, namely informant Annisa who came from Sukabumi, West Java and was also a student of Tarumanagara University. Annisa interprets various symbols of Sundanese culture displayed by Dedi Mulyadi, such as the headband as an identity and authenticity that strengthens Dedi Mulyadi's identity as a leader who is close to his people. In the interview process, Annisa also connected Dedi Mulyadi's style with conditions related to the development of her hometown which she considered to be developing rapidly. Finally, adding points that increase trust in Dedi Mulyadi. Through this, it can be explained that

Annisa received the message encoded by Dedi Mulyadi who said that she was a sincere, people-to-be, and had real work results.

The category of Negotiated reading can be defined as a condition in which the communicator receives in part the message conveyed by the communicator. Yusa Farchan, an academic and Dean of FISIP Pamulang University 2022-2024, admitted that the use of TikTok as a social media is indeed an effective political communication strategy and in line with the times. According to Yusa Farchan, the style of populism basically does have its own appeal because it highlights the side of simplicity and closeness to the people. However, he also reminded that populism also has risks, especially when the various policies made are not in line with the image that is being built through the social media used. Then there is also Frans, a resident of Bandung who works as a social media activist, who also sees that the content disseminated by Dedi Mulyadi is very effective in gaining engagement because it has consistency, strong storytelling, and uses production patterns such as multi-camera and three-act structure consisting of opening-conflict-resolution. According to Frans, the persona displayed by Dedi Mulyadi does look natural, but it still comes from a well-conceptualized production process. Then the reading of Negotiated also emerged from the informant Elvin, a housewife from Depok, West Java. Elvin admitted that he did feel touched by the various content spread by Dedi Mulyadi through TikTok, such as when Dedi Mulyadi bought the goods of a vegetable seller's mother. However, he also questioned why such moments always coincided with the condition of carrying a camera.

Oppositional reading is a condition when informants who express opinions are seen to strongly reject various populist messages thrown by Dedi Mulyadi. Febrina Galuh, a journalist and executive director of the Indonesian Independent Journalists Association, stated that the style of populism, as used by Dedi Mulyadi, can obscure the substance of a political problem. He assessed that the presence of social media can also be the cause of increasing people's tendency in terms of focusing on gimmicks and visual dramas, rather than the need to understand the content and issues of policies in more depth. Then on the same side, Neni Nur Hayati, a Director of the Democracy and Electoral Empowerment Partnership or DEEP Indonesia. Neni sees that the style of populism displayed by Dedi Mulyadi is an attitude that limits the quality of public communication, and leads to a form of communication that is one-way and creates a pseudo-reality. According to Neni, the excessive use of social media by politicians can weaken public rationality, strengthen the cult of an individual, and create various instant policies that are not based on qualified scientific decisions.

The research found that in the period from March 1-31, 2025, Dedi Mulyadi uploaded more content in the People's category with a frequency of 82 contents, or 47.67% of the total 172 content shared in that period. In this popular category, Dedi Mulyadi displays various content that contains himself in direct interaction with the community, as well as the decision-making process for a problem that is happening. The number of people's content that dominates the content category shared by Dedi Mulyadi, shows that the visualization of closeness to the community is not a mere coincidence, and is a major axis in the communication strategy that is being carried out. Populism works by constructing people's identity through representation and not through the similarity of objects (Laclau, 2005), the populist content that is predominantly shared by Dedi Mulyadi can be understood as an effort

to form a political construction, which is known to be close to the people through visual and narrative media.

Texts or discourses are never formed and appear without a purpose. Texts or discourses are always formed, then delivered with a purpose, importance, and function that is formed with the hope that it can be accepted by the audience. In political communication, discourse itself not only serves to convey information, but also functions as a tool to shape perceptions, influence views, and also legitimize the position and actions of a political figure in front of the public (Azhar, 2017). In the same position, discourse is also a non-neutral communication practice, because in it there is always an effort to make one meaning stand out compared to other meanings, because discourse is a certain way of representing reality that brings certain interests and ideologies (Eriyanto, 2001). Therefore, a text or discourse that is generated through social media cannot be seen as something as it is, because the discourse that is thrown through social media is a construction that is formed through the selection and repetition of meaning, with a certain purpose. At the level of text or what can be known as discourse, Dedi Mulyadi builds his populism through popular narratives, showing social actions, the use of regional languages, and various local cultural symbols that are consistently raised.

Social cognition is a bridge that functions to connect texts with social contexts. Social cognition is a system of knowledge, beliefs, values, and experiences owned by an individual or a social group, which is useful for understanding and interpreting a discourse. Dedi Mulyadi through the dominance of the emergence of content in the popular category is a reflection of an assumption that a communicator has about how the level of knowledge is, the way of thinking from the audience, and how he adjusts it. By using cultural symbols and various narratives that appear in everyday life, it is a sign of the emergence of shared knowledge that explains that cultural closeness and moral empathy can be used as a way to form strong legitimacy in the minds of the community. . Dedi Mulyadi with his role as a communicator strategically forms and sends a message that is assumed to be easily recognized, understood, and accepted by communicators who have various backgrounds. The public as communicators receive various meanings from what is conveyed by Dedi Mulyadi, because they have a specific cultural background from each other (Sobur, 2001).

The social context is a dimension that places the previous two dimensions, to a broader context. The social context is directly related to how a discourse can work to maintain existing dominance. At the level of the social context, the style of populism used by Dedi Mulyadi runs in an asymmetrical power relationship. Dedi Mulyadi is indeed part of the political elite who have direct access to power and resources owned by the state. But through the populist discourse that it has tried to form a symbolic power, power is not used with formal authority, but is exercised through moral representation and emotional closeness to the people. Dedi Mulyadi through his tiktok content tries to obscure the structural position he has, the power he has is trying to be exercised with a subtle and non-confrontational legitimacy mechanism.

Discourse often works by disguising power relations so as to form dominance that seems normal and acceptable (Eriyanto, 2001). The popular discourse displayed by Dedi Mulyadi repeatedly unconsciously forms a personal image and reproduces power that is not confrontational. Through direct interaction and empathy, Dedi Mulyadi builds power as a

moral concern, which ultimately creates an illusion that states that this leader is equal to the people. Dedi Mulyadi made power can be exercised with consent, and accepted by the people without coercion.

One of the problems that arise in the discourse of populism is the tendency to simplify politics into a moral opposition between a political actor who is considered close to the community, and another actor who is positioned as a party far from the public interest (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Dedi Mulyadi in his various TikTok content contains this political simplification through the visualization of social problems as moral and emotional problems, and not the output of a complicated and layered policy process. Everything that Dedi Mulyadi does in this context can be understood as a form of symbolic power. That is, when a power is not shown as structural dominance, but as ideological dominance by being formed as a moral relationship with a natural and non-problematic appearance. This kind of ideological dominance often works effectively when one thing is seen as something natural and in line with the common interest, and is not seen as a form of power (Van Dijk, 2017). Through it, the discourse of populism that focuses on empathy and closeness, has the potential to cover up the unequal power relations between a leader and his people.

The absence of the emergence of a narrative of conflict of interest, debate in policymaking, and accountability of an institution indicates that the ongoing populism discourse also has a subjective nature (Eriyanto, 2001). Many certain social aspects are brought up intensely, but other aspects that are not in line are made silent. This kind of practice can shape public perception in understanding power, the public can see that politics is a matter of good intentions, and the presence of a person personally, and is not related to the governance of the system and the mechanism of democracy that should run.

Therefore, although the populist style owned by Dedi Mulyadi has good effectiveness in building emotional closeness and symbolic legitimacy, it still has ideological limitations. Populism through digital media has the potential to eliminate the political focus that starts from a structural process to being limited to individual figures, as well as debates related to policy to moral narratives. This reaffirms that populism should not only be seen through the effectiveness of its communication, but also its side effects on the public's way of perceiving power and democracy.

TikTok as a social media creates an ideal condition for the development of political communication based on emotions. Visuals, short duration, and algorithms that encourage participation make this platform make emotion a major point in spreading messages. Therefore, digital populism that moves in the realm of emotional production such as empathy, sympathy, and closeness can develop well in it.

Interviews conducted with various informants, the interviews resulted in negotiated reading as a reading position that appeared in the majority, the audience in this position accepted some of the populist discourse conveyed, but still criticized other accompanying impacts. This study ultimately found that the audience as communicators would not be able to submit completely to the dominant meaning, but also did not reject the discourse given absolutely. Based on the reception theory presented by Stuart Hall, what happened in this case shows that the populist message encoded by the communicator always has an open nature, resulting in a diverse reading. The reason behind the different reception had by the public when receiving the message of populism in various Dedi Mulyadi content can be

explained through the perspective of social cognition put forward by Teun A. van Dijk. It can be understood that discourse is basically a practice that works through the process of forming a mental model, which is an individual's cognitive representation of social and political reality.

At the text level, the audience as communicators is confronted with a repetitive message structure consisting of popular narratives, cultural symbols, and visuals related to social action. However, with the presence of this repetitive discourse structure, in the end it is not possible to form a single meaning and always provides various possibilities for negotiation by the audience (Fiske, 2012). The same text or discourse can give rise to different meanings among the audience, this is also due to the diverse background of knowledge and experience among the audience that interprets it. The informants who expressed their opinions on this study were similar. Informants from academics and media practitioners admitted that the populist discourse conveyed by Dedi Mulyadi had good effectiveness, especially its performance in reaching the public at large. But with one voice, they also criticized the potential for harm such as emotional manipulation and the blurring of the substance of a policy. The attitude of these informants seems to state that what Dedi Mulyadi is doing is indeed very much in accordance with the current developments, but this can be a problem when publication activities become more dominant than real work at the substantive level.

At the level of social cognition, the difference in the receptions that emerge can be understood as a difference in the mental model possessed by the audience, in reading the discourse of a populist discourse. Dominant, negotiated, and oppositional reading is a product or result of the knowledge structure owned by an audience. Because audiences are in a position of acceptance or rejection, it is based on their personal experiences and values (McQuail, 2011). Audiences or communicators who have a fairly low level of media literacy will tend to build mental models with a direction that is in line with the populist narrative offered. Various direct actions such as proximity, action, and expressions of empathy will be easier to translate as authentic evidence of leadership by an audience of this level. On the other hand, if it is directed to audiences with academic, journalistic, or social activist backgrounds, it will show a tendency to be able to see and read the message offered more critically. By giving consideration to the purpose of production, the emergence of repetitive patterns, and potential other interests including the political interests behind the dissemination of content on social media.

At the level of the social context, the public reception is a reflection of the audience's awareness of the power that runs in the discourse of populism. The media is indeed a reality of public reference in assessing a social actor, including politicians in it (Bungin, 2015). However, the audience as a communicator has its own right to judge and accept something further. The dominant reading is a sign that the representation of the leader as part of the people is accepted without resistance. The reading of the negotiated is a reflection of the opposition to the symbolic power offered, the communicator is aware that there is a strategy being carried out, but still accepts the emotional and symbolic value offered. Then the oppositional reading becomes a sign of rejection of the symbolic meaning, the audience expressly rejects the populist discourse because of many problems.

The emergence of the majority of negotiated reading positions in this study shows that the audience is in an ambivalent condition, where they generally receive benefits and emotions such as ease of communicating with a leader, as well as increased attention to social problems arising from the populism discourse offered. But the community also expects the presence of definite limits, and the formation of more structured policies.

Although the negotiated reading is indeed so dominant in this study in the context of public reception, it still does not show that there is a strong enough ideological resistance to the emerging populism discourse. Negotiated reading is often a depiction of partial acceptance of a discourse. The public as the audience understands that the content disseminated by Dedi Mulyadi is a strategy, but this understanding does not form rejection, and forms a compromise that still benefits the communicator.

Ideology does not continue to work on the basis of total acceptance or rejection, it also works through partial acceptance or rejection that is not realized (Van Dijk, 1998). Negotiated readings do not always leave the communicator in a gray position between rejection and acceptance. The audience as communicators falls under the illusion of participation in digital political communication, they feel emotionally connected through the consumption of content, but that involvement does not turn into substantive political participation. Social media only serves as an affective articulation space, and is not an equal political space.

The position of the oppositinal reading, which appears to be less, actually shows that the rejection of the discourse of populism is still very limited and divided. Communicators in this position generally have a political background, as well as more established media literacy and do not have certain interests. This shows that the ability to be able to read a discourse critically is not only influenced by the exposure to the message being disseminated, but also influenced by knowledge and resources in society. In the end, public reception cannot be separated from widespread social inequality.

The public reception of populism from Dedi Mulyadi thus also shows how an ideology can run smoothly in the digital space. The predominant emergence of negotiated readings is an indication of digital populism that has succeeded in forming stable acceptance, without having to force communicators to accept it in total. The power of a discourse does not always have to work in total persuasion, it can also work through the compromise of meaning that seems reasonable from the audience's side.

CONCLUSION

The populism displayed by Dedi Mulyadi is populism of the people. The populism formed by Dedi Mulyadi was not built through an explicit antagonistic narrative that placed the people and the political elite on opposite sides, the populism formed by Dedi Mulyadi was constructed through a symbol of closeness between the leader and his people. This shows that Dedi Mulyadi's populism is a form of thin-centered ideology that adapts to socio-cultural conditions in Indonesia, as well as the basic character of the social media used. The acceptance by the public of the style of populism offered by Dedi Mulyadi was also found to be not homogeneous. Through the reception analysis process, three reading positions were found on the reception of the audience consisting of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional. The position of negotiated reading in this study emerged as the most dominant position of

reception, this shows that some of the audience as communicators do not accept totally, nor do they completely reject the populism of Dedi Mulyadi. The audience in this case admits that what Dedi Mulyadi does has its own attraction and effectiveness. However, the audience also realized that what Dedi Mulyadi did was part of a constructed political communication strategy.

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