

Media Framing of Indonesia's Capital Relocation: Political Legitimacy, Cultural Symbolism, and National Identity in Digital News Coverage

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ABSTRACT: The relocation of Indonesia's capital from Jakarta to Nusantara in East Kalimantan is not merely an administrative and infrastructural policy, but also a symbolic act of political communication. Online news media play a central role in translating this state-led project into public narratives that shape perceptions of legitimacy, cultural meaning, and national identity. This study examines how Indonesian online news media frame the capital relocation through three dimensions: political legitimacy, cultural symbolism, and national identity. Using a qualitative design, the study applies Pan and Kosicki's framing analysis model, which examines news discourse through syntactic, script, thematic, and rhetorical structures. The data consist of five online news articles published by DetikNews and DetikJatim concerning symbolic events in the early phase of the Nusantara project, particularly the ritual of uniting soil and water from provinces across Indonesia in the Kendi Nusantara. The findings reveal three dominant frames. First, the political legitimacy frame emphasizes presidential leadership, governors' participation, and coordinated state authority. Second, the cultural symbolism frame highlights ritual objects, cultural metaphors, and historical references such as Tanah Air, Kendi Nusantara, and Majapahit heritage. Third, the national identity frame presents the relocation as a collective national project that symbolically integrates diverse regions into a shared political imagination. These frames show how online news media transform a complex policy issue into a culturally resonant narrative of authority, unity, and national future-making. The study contributes to political communication and framing research by demonstrating how digital journalism legitimizes large-scale state projects through symbolic storytelling.

KEYWORDS: capital relocation, cultural symbolism, digital news media, media framing, national identity, political communication, political legitimacy

INTRODUCTION

The relocation of Indonesia's capital city from Jakarta to Nusantara in East Kalimantan is one of the most consequential political and infrastructural transformations in contemporary Indonesia. The project is officially presented as a response to Jakarta's demographic, ecological, and administrative pressures and as a strategic effort to promote more balanced national development. However, relocating a capital city is never merely a technical policy. It also involves the reorganization of political imagination, the production of legitimacy, and the symbolic redefinition of national space. In this sense, Indonesia's capital relocation provides an important case for political communication research because it reveals how state policy is narrated, ritualized, and circulated through digital news media.

Capital relocation is a highly visible state project that requires public justification. Government actors must persuade citizens that the policy is necessary, legitimate, and beneficial for the nation. At the same time, journalists select and organize events, sources, symbols, and narratives that guide audiences toward particular interpretations. Previous studies on media framing have shown that news media do not simply transmit information about public policy; rather, they construct interpretive frames that shape how audiences define problems, evaluate political actors, and imagine possible futures (Entman, 1993; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Framing is also important because policy narratives can organize legitimacy claims through selected causal stories, actor positions, and symbolic emphases (Bandelow et al., 2025; D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2020). In the context of capital relocation, framing becomes especially important because the project is simultaneously a policy decision, a development agenda, and a symbolic claim about national unity.

Indonesia's new capital city, officially named Nusantara, has been framed in public discourse through multiple narratives, including modernization, regional equity, environmental sustainability, bureaucratic efficiency, and national identity. Existing studies have



examined various dimensions of the Nusantara capital project, including governance challenges, environmental implications, policy debates, ecological politics, and regional development impacts (Anirwan et al., 2024; Bangun, 2024; Kalalinggi et al., 2023; Perwira et al., 2024; Sari, 2023). Other studies have begun to examine media representations of the new capital, particularly in relation to environmental issues, cultural communication, and the construction of public meaning (Dwinarko et al., 2023; Permadi et al., 2024; Santang et al., 2024). Nevertheless, there remains a need for more focused analysis of how online news media construct political legitimacy, cultural symbolism, and national identity in their coverage of the relocation.

One of the most widely reported symbolic events in the early phase of the Nusantara project was the ritual of gathering soil and water from provinces across Indonesia and uniting them in a ceremonial vessel known as the Kendi Nusantara. This event received substantial attention because it transformed the capital relocation from an abstract policy into a visual and symbolic performance. The ritual brought together President Joko Widodo and regional governors, thereby producing an image of national coordination. It also mobilized culturally meaningful expressions such as Tanah Air and Nusantara, as well as historical references to Majapahit, which connected the contemporary relocation project to older narratives of territorial unity and collective identity.

Such symbolic events are important in political communication because they communicate legitimacy beyond formal policy language. Political legitimacy is not produced solely through legal authority or administrative procedures; it is also constructed through narratives, rituals, images, and cultural signs that render state action meaningful and acceptable. Media discourse is therefore a key arena where power, politics, and public meaning are framed and negotiated (Roslyng & Dindler, 2023). Online news media contribute to this process by selecting symbolic moments, emphasizing political actors, and connecting policy events to broader cultural narratives. In digital journalism, these narratives circulate rapidly and become part of the public arena in which citizens interpret state-led development initiatives.

This study, therefore, examines how Indonesian online news media frame the relocation of the capital city to Nusantara through the lenses of political legitimacy, cultural symbolism, and national identity. By applying the framing model of Pan and Kosicki (1993), the study analyzes how the structural elements of news discourse—syntactic, script, thematic, and rhetorical structures work together to produce dominant interpretations of the capital relocation. The article asks three research questions: (1) How do online news media frame political legitimacy in their coverage of Indonesia's capital relocation? (2) How are cultural symbols and historical references used to construct meaning around the relocation? (3) How do news frames connect the capital relocation to narratives of national identity and territorial unity?

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design using framing analysis. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to examine meaning construction, symbolic representation, and interpretive patterns in online news discourse (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The object of analysis is not the factual accuracy of the policy itself, but the way news media construct narratives about the relocation of Indonesia's capital city. Framing analysis enables the researcher to identify how media texts select, organize, and emphasize specific aspects of the relocation to produce particular political and cultural interpretations (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2020).

The analysis is guided by the Pan and Kosicki model of news framing. This model examines how syntactic, script, thematic, and rhetorical structures work together in the construction of media frames. The study focuses on three interpretive dimensions derived from the revised title and research focus: political legitimacy, cultural symbolism, and national identity. These dimensions are treated as analytical lenses for interpreting the dominant meanings produced by the news coverage. This approach is consistent with broader framing scholarship that treats frames as organizing principles through which media texts make selected aspects of reality more meaningful and salient (Reese, 2007; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019).

Data Source and Sampling

The data consist of five online news articles published by Indonesian digital news platforms DetikNews and DetikJatim. These articles were selected because they report symbolic events associated with the early phase of the Nusantara capital project, especially the ritual of collecting and uniting soil and water from provinces across Indonesia. The articles were selected using purposive sampling, which is suitable for identifying information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). The corpus is presented in Table 1

Table I. Corpus of Online News Articles on Indonesia's Capital Relocation

No.	Media and News Title	Narrative Focus	Initial Analytical Focus
1	DetikNews: Air-Tanah dari 33 Gubernur Akan Digabung dalam Kendi Nusantara di IKN	Ritual unification of soil and water from provinces	National identity and territorial unity
2	DetikNews: Tentang Air-Tanah 33 Daerah ke Nusantara dan Ajakan Jokowi Berkemah	Philosophical explanation of Tanah Air symbolism	Cultural symbolism
3	DetikNews: Jokowi dan Seluruh Gubernur Satukan Tanah-Air di IKN Nusantara	National ceremony led by the President	Political legitimacy
4	DetikNews: Jokowi ke IKN: Penyatuan Tanah-Air hingga Berkemah di Nusantara	Presidential activities at the IKN site	Political legitimacy
5	DetikJatim: Khofifah Ambil Tanah-Air dari Situs Sumur Upas untuk IKN Nusantara	Historical symbolism of Majapahit heritage	Cultural symbolism and national identity

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is the individual online news article. Each article is treated as a complete unit of news discourse containing a headline, a lead, a quotation, a narrative sequence, a thematic organization, and a rhetorical expression. The analysis examines how these textual elements construct frames related to political legitimacy, cultural symbolism, and national identity. Particular attention is given to the representation of political actors, the use of symbolic vocabulary, and the connection between ceremonial events and broader narratives of national unity.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted through a systematic search of online news platforms using keywords related to IKN, Nusantara, Tanah Air, Kendi Nusantara, Jokowi, governors, and capital relocation. The search focused on articles that directly discussed symbolic events surrounding the early stages of the relocation project. Articles were then screened for relevance to the research questions. Only articles that contained explicit references to political actors, ceremonial rituals, cultural symbols, or national identity narratives were included in the corpus.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis proceeded in four stages. First, each article was read repeatedly to identify key actors, events, symbols, and narrative emphases. Second, the articles were coded according to the four structural dimensions of Pan and Kosicki's framing model. The syntactic structure was examined through headlines, leads, and the selection of sources. The script structure was examined through the narrative sequence of events and the positioning of actors. The thematic structure was examined through the recurring ideas that connected the relocation to legitimacy, culture, and identity. The rhetorical structure was examined through symbolic language, metaphors, and historical references. Third, the coded results were compared across the five articles to identify dominant and recurring frames. Fourth, the frames were interpreted within the broader context of political communication. This final stage focused on how online news coverage shapes public interpretation of capital relocation as a legitimate state project, a culturally meaningful ritual, and a symbolic representation of national identity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**Online News Narratives as Political Communication of Capital Relocation**

The analysis indicates that online news coverage of Indonesia's capital relocation does not present the project merely as a technical or administrative matter. Instead, the articles construct the relocation as a symbolic political event. Across the corpus, journalists emphasize ceremonial activities, leadership presence, and cultural symbols associated with the new capital. The ritual of collecting soil and water from different provinces becomes the central narrative device through which the relocation is presented to the public. This narrative focus has important implications for political communication. By foregrounding the ritual rather than technical details such as financing, legal design, or urban planning, the news coverage translates the capital relocation into a story of unity and legitimacy. The presence of President Joko Widodo and regional governors functions as a visual and textual sign of state coordination. The ritual itself functions as a cultural sign that connects the project to the Indonesian imagination of Tanah Air. In



this way, online news media transform the relocation from a policy process into a symbolic national performance. This pattern is consistent with studies showing that news framing of infrastructure projects can highlight power, legitimacy, and public meaning rather than only technical project details (Ninan, 2022; Young & Hermida, 2025).

The corpus shows that the relocation is narrated through three interrelated frames. The first is political legitimacy, which emphasizes the authority of national leadership and the collective participation of regional political actors. The second is cultural symbolism, which highlights ritual objects, symbolic language, and historical references. The third is national identity, which presents the new capital as a shared national space that integrates the archipelago. These frames do not operate separately; rather, they reinforce one another. Political legitimacy becomes stronger when it is expressed through cultural symbols, while cultural symbolism gains political significance when it is attached to national leadership and identity.

Frame 1: Political Legitimacy through Leadership and Coordinated Governance

The political legitimacy frame is most evident in articles that foreground President Joko Widodo's presence and actions. Headlines that place the President at the center of the ritual construct the relocation as a state-led project guided by legitimate national authority. This framing is reinforced by the presence of governors from across Indonesia, who are represented as regional actors participating in a shared national ceremony. The result is a narrative of coordinated governance in which central and regional authorities appear aligned in support of the new capital. At the syntactic level, political legitimacy is produced through headlines and leads that emphasize presidential action. The phrase "the President and all governors unite soil and water in Nusantara" directs audience attention to leadership and collective participation. At the script level, the storyline follows the sequence of political actors arriving at the new capital site, participating in the ritual, and symbolically affirming the project. This script positions the relocation as an orderly and authoritative national event rather than a contested policy process.

The thematic structure of political legitimacy is organized around state authority, national coordination, and leadership performance. The articles do not primarily debate the legal or administrative basis of the relocation. Instead, they communicate legitimacy through symbolic enactment. The President's presence signals political commitment, while the governors' participation suggests broader territorial representation. In this sense, legitimacy is not only argued; it is performed through media-visible rituals. This frame illustrates how political communication operates through ceremonial representation. The ceremony functions as a legitimacy ritual because it visually and narratively assembles the state, the regions, and the future capital in a single symbolic event. Online news media amplify this ritual by turning it into a public narrative. As a result, the relocation is framed as a legitimate national project supported by political leadership across levels of government.

Frame 2: Cultural Symbolism through Tanah Air, Kendi Nusantara, and Historical Heritage

The cultural symbolism frame emerges through the repeated use of symbolic objects, metaphors, and historical references. The ritual of uniting soil and water is central to this frame. Soil and water are not presented as ordinary physical materials; they are narrated as representations of Indonesia's territorial and cultural diversity. The term Tanah Air is particularly important because it connects the ritual to a deeply embedded national metaphor. By reporting on the collection of soil and water from different provinces, the media make the capital relocation culturally meaningful and emotionally resonant. The Kendi Nusantara is another important symbolic device. As a ceremonial vessel, it gathers soil and water from the archipelago into one object. In media discourse, the Kendi Nusantara becomes a visual metaphor for national unity. It allows a complex political and infrastructural policy to be represented through a simple and culturally recognizable image. The rhetorical power of the vessel lies in its ability to condense the ideas of many regions into a single national container.

Historical symbolism also strengthens this frame. The article about the collection of soil and water from the Sumur Upas site connects the ritual to the Majapahit heritage. This reference links the relocation to a historical imagination of archipelagic unity. By invoking Majapahit, the news narrative suggests that the new capital is not merely a future-oriented development project, but also part of a longer cultural memory of unity and territorial integration. The relocation is therefore positioned between past heritage and future aspiration. Cultural symbolism functions as a bridge between state policy and public meaning. Without symbolic framing, capital relocation may appear as a bureaucratic or technocratic decision. By using Tanah Air, Kendi Nusantara, Nusantara, and Majapahit heritage, the media translates the policy into culturally familiar terms. This translation is politically significant because cultural resonance can foster public acceptance and strengthen the project's symbolic legitimacy.

Frame 3: National Identity and the Imagination of Archipelagic Unity

The national identity frame presents the relocation as a collective project of the Indonesian nation. This frame is constructed through the representation of provinces across the archipelago as contributors to the symbolic foundation of the new capital. The ritual of bringing soil and water from different regions communicates the idea that Nusantara belongs not only to the central government or to East Kalimantan, but to the entire nation. In this framing, the new capital becomes a shared symbolic space for Indonesia's territorial and cultural diversity. The phrase Tanah Air plays a central role in this identity frame. It connects land and water, territory and emotion, geography and belonging. By emphasizing the unity of soil and water, the news narratives portray Indonesia as an archipelagic nation whose diversity can be symbolically integrated in Nusantara. The relocation is therefore framed not only as a shift of administrative center, but as a rearticulation of national identity.

This identity frame also operates through the concept of Nusantara. The name of the new capital itself carries historical and cultural meaning. In the analyzed news coverage, Nusantara is not treated as a neutral geographic label. It is used as an evocative sign of the Indonesian archipelago and a future-oriented national imagination. By associating the new capital with Nusantara, media narratives connect the project to a broader sense of Indonesian unity across islands, ethnicities, and regions. However, the national identity frame also shapes what is emphasized and what is marginalized. By foregrounding unity, the frame may reduce attention to local contestation, environmental concerns, Indigenous perspectives, and the effects of uneven development. This does not mean that the identity narrative is false, but it shows that framing always involves selection. The media's emphasis on national unity creates a powerful symbolic interpretation, while other possible interpretations become less visible within the selected corpus. This selective visibility is a central concern in framing studies because salience can direct attention toward some meanings while pushing alternative interpretations into the background (Entman, 1993; Scheufele & Iyengar, 2017).

Interrelation of the Three Frames

The three frames identified in this study are analytically distinct but empirically intertwined. Political legitimacy is strengthened through cultural symbolism. Cultural symbolism gains national significance through the identity frame. National identity becomes politically effective when it is attached to leadership and state authority. The ritual of uniting soil and water is therefore a convergence point where political, cultural, and national meanings meet.

From a political communication perspective, this convergence is important because it shows how state-led development projects are legitimized through symbolic storytelling. The relocation of the capital city could have been reported primarily through technical issues such as land use, construction timelines, budgeting, or governance. Instead, the selected articles emphasize ritual, leadership, and identity. This choice constructs the relocation as a national story rather than merely a policy report.

The interaction of frames also demonstrates the relevance of the Pan and Kosicki model. Syntactic elements direct attention to the ritual and political actors. Script structures organize the ceremony into a coherent storyline of leadership and participation. Thematic structures connect the event to unity, legitimacy, and identity. Rhetorical structures deepen the frame through symbolic terms and historical references. Together, these structures create a durable interpretive pattern in online news coverage.

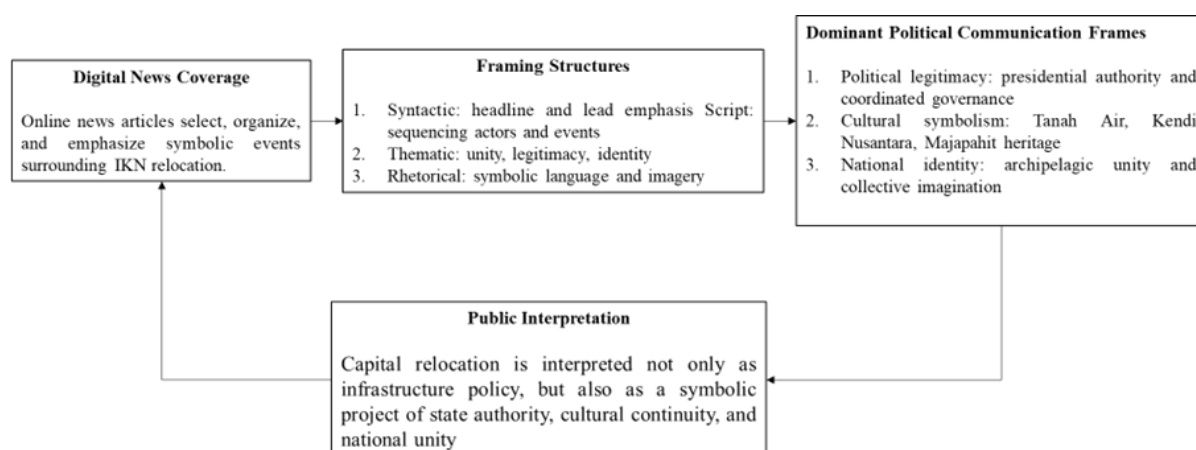


Figure I. Conceptual Model of Media Framing of Indonesia's Capital Relocation



DISCUSSION

The findings show that online news coverage of Indonesia's capital relocation operates as a form of political communication that links policy, authority, culture, and identity. Rather than presenting the relocation only as an infrastructural initiative, the analyzed articles construct it as a symbolic national project. This confirms the central argument of framing theory: media texts organize reality by making some aspects more salient than others (Entman, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). In this case, the most salient aspects are presidential leadership, ritual participation, cultural symbols, and narratives of national unity. The findings also support the view that news framing is both textual and interpretive because media texts organize actors, values, and causal meanings into recognizable patterns (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2020; Reese, 2007).

The political legitimacy frame indicates that media coverage can support the normalization of state authority through symbolic representation. When the President and governors are placed at the center of the narrative, the relocation appears as a coordinated and authoritative project. This is consistent with political communication scholarship that views media discourse as a key arena for the construction of legitimacy and public meaning. The news coverage does not simply state that the relocation is legitimate; it shows legitimacy through ritualized images of leadership and regional participation.

The cultural symbolism frame demonstrates that political legitimacy in Indonesia is mediated through culturally meaningful signs. The terms Tanah Air and Nusantara are not merely descriptive. They are condensed symbols that connect territory, emotion, history, and belonging. The Kendi Nusantara ritual transforms the relocation into a symbolic act of gathering the nation. This finding contributes to framing research by showing that cultural symbols can function as framing devices in policy communication. They enable journalists to translate complex development policies into narratives that resonate with public memory and collective identity. The national identity frame further shows that capital relocation is narrated as a reimagining of the nation. A capital city is not only an administrative center; it is also a symbolic center of political identity. By representing the new capital as the product of soil and water from across the archipelago, the media construct Nusantara as a shared national space. This frame supports a narrative of unity, but it may also oversimplify the project's contested dimensions. A critical reading of the frame, therefore, requires attention to what is omitted, including environmental risks, social displacement, Indigenous communities, and alternative political interpretations.

Overall, the study illustrates that digital news media play a crucial role in shaping the public meaning of large-scale state projects. In the digital media environment, symbolic events are rapidly circulated and become interpretive resources for public discourse. The framing of Indonesia's capital relocation shows how development, political, and cultural communication intersect in online journalism. This is consistent with recent arguments that digital news environments reshape framing practices through circulation, platform visibility, and the interaction between journalistic narratives and public interpretation (Lopez-Rabadan, 2022; Han, 2024).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study has several theoretical implications. First, it reinforces the relevance of the Pan and Kosicki framing model for analyzing contemporary digital news discourse. The model enables a detailed examination of how textual structures and symbolic devices work together to produce political meaning. Second, the study extends framing research by showing that large-scale development policies can be framed not only through economic or environmental narratives, but also through political legitimacy, cultural symbolism, and national identity. Third, the study contributes to political communication scholarship by demonstrating how media coverage can transform state policy into a symbolic narrative of authority, unity, and national future-making. These implications align with recent developments in framing studies that emphasize the relationship between policy narratives, media power, and digital circulation (Bandelow et al., 2025; Roslyng & Dindler, 2023; Lopez-Rabadan, 2022).

The study also has practical implications. For journalists, the findings highlight the importance of reflexivity in reporting state-led development projects. Symbolic narratives can make policy issues more accessible, but they can also marginalize critical perspectives if not balanced with analysis of risks, contestation, and affected communities. For policymakers, the findings show that public communication surrounding capital relocation depends not only on technical explanation but also on cultural resonance and symbolic legitimacy. For citizens and civil society, the study underscores the need to critically examine how media frames shape perceptions of national projects.

In conclusion, online news media frame Indonesia's capital relocation through three dominant and interrelated frames: political legitimacy, cultural symbolism, and national identity. The political legitimacy frame emphasizes presidential leadership and



coordinated governance. The cultural symbolism frame foregrounds Tanah Air, Kendi Nusantara, and historical heritage. The national identity frame presents Nusantara as a shared symbolic space for archipelagic unity. Through the interaction of syntactic, script, thematic, and rhetorical structures, the media transform the relocation from a technical policy into a culturally resonant political narrative. The study is limited by its focus on a small corpus of five articles from selected online news outlets. Future research could expand the corpus to include media with different editorial orientations, compare mainstream news with social media discourse, or examine how audiences interpret and negotiate these frames. Comparative research with other cases of capital relocation could also deepen understanding of how media framing constructs legitimacy and identity in large-scale national development projects.

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