



FROM SYMBOLIC BREAKTHROUGH TO TECHNOCRATIC AUTHORITY: MEDIA FRAMING OF SHERLY TJOANDA'S LEADERSHIP IN REGIONAL ONLINE NEWS COVERAGE

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Abstract :

This study examines how regional online media construct the legitimacy of female political leadership in a decentralized democracy. Focusing on the early months of Sherly Tjoanda's tenure as the first female Governor of North Maluku, the research investigates whether media framing remains confined to symbolic gender representation or evolves toward technocratic authority. Using a qualitative framing analysis based on Pan and Kosicki's structural model, this study analyzes four news articles published by Nuansamalut.com during the first three months following the governor's inauguration (February–May 2025). The analysis examines syntactic, script, thematic, and rhetorical structures to identify patterns of meaning construction and longitudinal shifts in framing. The findings reveal a sequential transformation of media framing. The initial coverage emphasizes symbolic breakthrough and gender milestone narratives. Subsequent reporting shifts toward managerial rationality (100-day programs), executive performance (hospital upgrading initiatives), and moral-administrative governance (budget accountability enforcement). Rather than maintaining a gendered emotional frame, the media progressively constructs technocratic legitimacy. This indicates that regional media in decentralized contexts can function as agents of legitimacy consolidation rather than perpetrators of gender stereotypes. This study introduces the concept of sequential framing of legitimacy, highlighting the temporal evolution of media framing from symbolic to rational-legal authority. By situating the analysis at the subnational level, the research expands gendered political framing literature beyond national election campaigns and Western contexts. The findings contribute to communication and political legitimacy scholarship by demonstrating how media discourse mediates the transformation of symbolic representation into technocratic governance authority in emerging democracies.

Keywords : media framing, female political leadership, political legitimacy, decentralization, gendered political communication, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

The increasing participation of women in political leadership has prompted sustained scholarly attention to how media construct their legitimacy in the public sphere. Although the numerical representation of women in executive office has grown over the past decade, media narratives continue to play a decisive role in shaping how the public interprets women's leadership, particularly during the early stages of their tenure. In decentralized democracies, where authority is distributed across national and subnational levels, media often impose a heightened symbolic burden on female leaders. They are frequently framed either as emotional embodiments of gender breakthrough signifying empathy, renewal, or moral transformation or as rational actors possessing technocratic capacity. Numerous studies indicate that early media



coverage tends to privilege personal narratives and affective dimensions before assessing policy competence (Aliyamsyah Siregar et al., 2025; Hubeis & Susanto, 2019). Such patterns risk constraining rational authority by foregrounding emotional resonance over managerial capability. Consequently, media framing during the initial phase of women's leadership constitutes a critical arena in which technocratic legitimacy may either be consolidated or confined within symbolic representation.

Within this global context, Indonesia presents a significant analytical setting. Since the implementation of regional autonomy reforms in the early 2000s, Indonesia has developed into one of the world's largest decentralized democracies, with substantial authority devolved to provincial and district governments. This decentralization has intensified local political dynamics while simultaneously strengthening the role of regional media in shaping public opinion. Digital transformation has further positioned regional online media as central actors in constructing political meaning, particularly following local executive elections. In the early post-inauguration period when administrative track records remain under formation media actively define public expectations and evaluate leadership capacity. In this context, regional media framing can determine whether a newly elected governor is perceived primarily as a symbolic figure or as a technocratic authority capable of navigating multilevel governance (Anggreani & Hanife, 2025).

The leadership of Sherly Tjoanda, the first woman to serve as Governor of North Maluku, offers a compelling empirical case. Her tenure commenced under intense public scrutiny, marked by emotional political narratives as well as fiscal and bureaucratic challenges (Jufri & Faizah, 2025; Takalapeta, 2025; Hakim, 2025; Rahmanto & Anshori, 2025; Saputra et al., 2025; Fadhillah, 2025). In a region characterized by entrenched patriarchal political structures, her inauguration represented both a symbolic breakthrough and a test of administrative capacity. The first three months of her leadership constituted a crucial phase of public image formation. During this period, media coverage did not merely report events but actively shaped perceptions regarding whether Sherly was positioned as a historic symbolic figure or as a technocratic leader capable of executing policy and enforcing fiscal discipline. Framing in this transitional phase operated as a dynamic process through which political legitimacy was progressively negotiated (Saputra et al., 2025).

Despite the expanding body of research on gendered political framing, existing scholarship remains largely concentrated at the national level within Western democracies (Gibbons, 2025; Quinn Hegarty, 2025). Many studies focus on electoral campaigns or crisis communication (Aliyamsyah Siregar et al., 2025), whereas longitudinal analyses of female leadership framing at the subnational level in decentralized systems remain limited. Research on peripheral regions, particularly in Southeast Asia, is also relatively scarce (Sazali & Basit, 2020). In Indonesia's decentralized governance system, local leaders operate at the intersection of local cultural norms, national political affiliations, and rapidly evolving digital media ecosystems (Anggreani & Hanife, 2025; Jufri & Faizah,

2025). Yet systematic investigations tracing how regional online media construct and transform the legitimacy of female governors over time remain underdeveloped. This gap provides analytical space to examine how gender symbolism may evolve into technocratic authority within local political arenas.

This study addresses this gap by analyzing the evolution of media framing surrounding Sherly Tjoanda's leadership during the first three months of her tenure. Employing Zhongdang Pan and Gerald M. Kosicki's framing model, the research examines syntactic, script, thematic, and rhetorical structures to identify patterns of narrative construction. Rather than treating framing as a static representational attribute, this study conceptualizes it as a sequential process through which legitimacy is gradually constructed. The research aims to explain how media narratives shift from emphasizing symbolic breakthrough highlighting gender, historical novelty, and emotional resonance toward constructing technocratic authority through themes of policy execution, fiscal management, and administrative discipline. By introducing the concept of "sequential framing of legitimacy," this study contributes theoretically to framing scholarship by incorporating a temporal dimension into the analysis of gender-based political representation and extending the application of Pan and Kosicki's model within decentralized democratic contexts.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using framing analysis as its primary methodological approach. A qualitative paradigm was selected because the objective of the study is to understand how media construct meaning around women's political leadership, rather than to measure frequency or conduct quantitative content analysis. The framing model developed by Pan and Kosicki was adopted due to its comprehensive structural analytical framework, encompassing four key dimensions: syntactic, script, thematic, and rhetorical structures (Aliyamsyah Siregar et al., 2025; Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

This model facilitates an in-depth examination of how headlines, leads, source selection, narrative organization, and lexical choices operate simultaneously in constructing dominant frames. Unlike more normative framing models, Pan and Kosicki emphasize textual structure as a concrete discursive practice. In the context of this study, the model enables identification of sequential framing patterns evolving across four distinct news texts. Accordingly, the model reveals not only what is framed, but how legitimacy is constructed and through which structural mechanisms.

News Selection Criteria and Period of Analysis

The unit of analysis consists of news articles published by Nuansamalut.com concerning the leadership of Governor Sherly Tjoanda during the first three months following her inauguration (February–May 2025). This period was selected because the early phase of leadership represents a critical moment in the formation of public legitimacy (Gibbons, 2022).

News articles were selected based on three primary criteria:

1. The article explicitly positions Sherly Tjoanda as the primary actor in both

headline and lead.

2. The article reports on governmental policies or executive actions representing leadership performance.
3. The article corresponds to a transitional phase of legitimacy formation: inauguration, 100-day performance agenda, policy implementation, and fiscal oversight action.

Based on these criteria, four key articles were purposively selected to represent transitional legitimacy phases:

1. Inauguration (20 February 2025)
2. 100-Day Work Program (5 March 2025)
3. Hospital Upgrade Initiative (9 March 2025)
4. Return of Remaining Public Subsidy Funds (20 May 2025)

The selection was not based on quantity but on representativeness of legitimacy construction stages. In qualitative inquiry, purposive sampling aims to capture depth of meaning rather than statistical generalization (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Guetterman et al., 2015). Collectively, these four articles form a narrative sequence illustrating the evolution of framing from symbolic recognition to technocratic authority.

Unit of Analysis

The analysis focuses on the following structural units:

1. **Headline and Lead (Syntactic Structure)** – to identify the primary focus and initial angle of the news coverage.
2. **Source Quotations and 5W+1H Structure (Script Structure)** – to examine actor dominance, narrative sequencing, and storytelling strategies.
3. **Thematic Structure** – to analyze propositional coherence, inter-sentential relationships, and recurring thematic emphases.
4. **Lexical Choices and Rhetorical Devices (Rhetorical Structure)** – to identify metaphors, labeling, evaluative language, and the use of numerical precision or symbolic expressions emphasizing particular meanings.

Through these analytical units, the study examines how symbolic legitimacy (e.g., “the first female governor”) gradually shifts toward technocratic legitimacy (e.g., “upgraded institutional capacity,” “accountability,” “budget recovery instruction”).

Data Analysis Procedure

The analytical procedure was conducted in several stages. First, the researcher performed a comprehensive reading of each news text to identify dominant framing patterns. Second, each article was systematically analyzed using the four structural dimensions proposed by Pan and Kosicki. Third, findings from each article were compared longitudinally to detect the evolution of frames across time. Fourth, the results were interpreted within the theoretical frameworks of political legitimacy and gendered political framing.

The analysis was iterative in nature, involving repeated readings of the texts to ensure interpretive consistency. This approach aligns with qualitative discourse analysis principles emphasizing reflexivity, contextual sensitivity, and

interpretive rigor (Goncing & Syahrul, 2021; Muhajir, 2018; Wahyuni, 2008).

Interpretive Validity Strategies

To enhance interpretive validity, several strategies were employed:

1. **Source triangulation**, combining textual analysis with interviews conducted with editorial staff, as documented in the research materials.
2. **Thick description**, presenting direct textual excerpts to ensure analytical transparency.
3. **Audit trail**, maintaining systematic documentation of data selection and analytical procedures to allow traceability and methodological transparency.
4. **Researcher reflexivity**, acknowledging that framing analysis involves interpretive positioning shaped by the researcher's epistemological stance.

Through these strategies, the study seeks to maintain credibility, dependability, and analytical rigor within a qualitative research framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Symbolic Phase: Gender Milestone as Initial Legitimacy

The news coverage published on 20 February 2025 positions the headline "First Female Governor" as a primary rhetorical device marking Sherly's leadership as a historical milestone. At the syntactic level, gender identity is foregrounded in the headline, while the script structure constructs an emotional narrative through lexical choices such as "moved," "proud," and "historic." Within the framework of Pan and Kosicki (1993), these headline and lexical elements function as an organizing idea that frames the inauguration not merely as an administrative procedure, but as a symbol of social transformation.

This framing aligns with findings by Gibbons (2022) and Quinn Hegarty (2025), which demonstrate that media tend to situate female politicians within identity-based and symbolic representations during the early stages of coverage before addressing policy competence. At this stage, legitimacy is constructed symbolically, corresponding to charismatic and representational categories within a Weberian framework of legitimacy. However, unlike reductive patterns identified in Western gender-framing studies, this coverage begins to incorporate programmatic elements such as education and healthcare toward the end of the text. This indicates that symbolism does not stand alone but is gradually linked to policy orientation.

2. Managerial Phase: The 100-Day Agenda and Policy Rationality

The 5 March 2025 article marks a shift from symbolism to managerial rationality. The headline "100 Days of Work" syntactically redirects focus from identity to performance. Thematic structure develops a cause-and-effect narrative linking developmental vision to the challenge of a 50 percent budget reduction. The use of precise numerical data and fiscal terminology signals a rhetorical shift toward rational-legal legitimacy. From a framing perspective, gender identity is no longer the central anchor; instead, empirical data and policy constraints shape the narrative.

This finding extends the argument of Sazali and Basit (2020), who observed that Southeast Asian media often frame female politicians through personal stereotypes. In this case, however, the media construct Sherly as a data-driven and pragmatic leader. This shift affirms the view that legitimacy in modern democracies is consolidated through administrative capacity and policy accountability (Popęda & Hadasik, 2024).

3. Executive Phase: Policy Breakthrough and Political Access

The 9 March 2025 coverage introduces the frame of “breakthrough” and the metaphor of “moving up a class.” Rhetorically, this metaphor signifies both improvement in public service quality and regional social mobility. The syntactic structure associates Sherly with national officials specifically the Minister of Health and the Presidential Staff Office creating an impression of political access and lobbying capacity. From the perspective of political legitimacy, this phase reflects a transition from symbolic legitimacy to performative legitimacy. Sherly is no longer framed as a representational figure but as an executive actor capable of delivering tangible policy outcomes.

Although Aliyamsyah Siregar et al. (2025) suggest that online media framing is often influenced by editorial ideological preferences, in this case the frame remains consistently oriented toward substantive achievement. This indicates that regional media do not halt at gender representation but progressively develop a technocratic narrative.

4. Moral Governance Phase: Fiscal Accountability

The 20 May 2025 article reinforces moral-administrative legitimacy. The headline “Orders Remaining Budget Funds Returned to the Regional Treasury” employs an imperative structure that asserts authority. The explicit reference to IDR 864 million functions rhetorically to convey precision and transparency. In framing theory, the use of numerical specificity and deadlines (“within one day”) enhances perceptions of decisiveness and control (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Theoretically, this represents the consolidation of rational-legal legitimacy supported by moral governance.

This finding contrasts with patterns identified by Gibbons (2022), where female politicians often remain framed within emotional narratives even after assuming office. In the North Maluku context, however, media emphasize oversight, fiscal discipline, and administrative rigor as defining features of leadership.

Discussion

The findings confirm the presence of a pattern termed *sequential framing of legitimacy* a gradual process through which the legitimacy of female leadership is constructed through symbolic, technocratic, and moral-administrative stages. This pattern demonstrates that media framing is not a static representational act but a dynamic discursive process that evolves alongside political legitimacy. In the initial phase, the identity of “first female governor” functions as a symbolic entry point an anchor of representational legitimacy. However, legitimacy does not remain at the level of identity; it evolves toward policy rationality and administrative consolidation.

This transformation can be systematically interpreted through the analytical lens of Pan and Kosicki (1993). In the symbolic phase, rhetorical structures are dominated by emotional diction and historical metaphors. The syntactic structure places gender identity at the center of meaning through headline prominence, while thematic structure frames the inauguration as a monumental event. In subsequent phases, however, the organizing idea shifts: fiscal figures, technical terminology, and executive actions replace identity symbolism as the central narrative anchor. Framing thus transitions from identity-based recognition to performative policy authority.

The rhetorical shift from expressions such as “moved” and “historic” to references like “50% DAK/DAU reduction,” “institutional upgrade,” and “IDR 864 million budget return” illustrates a transition from affective legitimacy to rational-legal legitimacy. Within a Weberian framework, this reflects a shift from symbolic charisma to administrative competence. Media discourse no longer foregrounds gender representation as the primary source of authority but instead positions policy effectiveness as its foundation.

This finding is particularly significant because it diverges from dominant trends in international scholarship. Studies by Quinn Hegarty (2025) and Gibbons (2022) indicate that media frequently sustain emotional framing of female politicians even after they enter governance. Sazali and Basit (2020) similarly observe consistent reproduction of gender stereotypes in Southeast Asian political framing. In contrast, within Nuansamalut.com’s coverage, gender symbolism serves as an initial legitimacy trigger rather than a limiting frame.

This suggests that in decentralized democracies such as Indonesia, regional media can function as agents of legitimacy transformation. Decentralization generates symbolic competition distinct from national politics. At the subnational level, proximity to constituents intensifies demands for accountability, requiring newly inaugurated leaders to demonstrate executive capacity promptly. In such contexts, prolonged reliance on symbolic framing risks undermining legitimacy. Consequently, media possess discursive incentives to shift framing toward policy performance.

The temporal dimension constitutes the primary theoretical contribution of this study. Most framing research examines isolated communicative episodes campaigns or crises. This study demonstrates that legitimacy emerges through layered accumulations of frames. Gender symbolism functions as a legitimacy trigger, but sustainable legitimacy depends on performance reinforcement and moral consolidation. Female political legitimacy, therefore, is not established through a single narrative but through systematic discursive progression.

The concept of *sequential framing of legitimacy* expands gendered political framing literature by incorporating temporal evolution as an analytical variable. Framing is not only about what is highlighted, but also about when and in what sequence particular emphases emerge. That sequence determines the trajectory of legitimacy: whether it remains confined to symbolic recognition or evolves into rational authority.

In North Maluku a peripheral region within Indonesia’s national power

structure regional media assume an increasingly strategic role. Media are not merely channels of information dissemination but mediators of legitimacy between local government and the public. By linking initial gender symbolism to subsequent technocratic narratives, media transform identity into authority.

Conceptually, this suggests that gender framing is not inherently reductive or stereotypical. Under certain conditions, symbolic framing can operate as initial legitimacy capital that is subsequently converted into rational authority. This conversion occurs when media consistently associate identity with policy output and administrative governance. Accordingly, this study enriches framing theory through its temporal dimension while extending political legitimacy scholarship by demonstrating how female authority is negotiated through evolving media discourse at the subnational level. The findings address a critical gap in political communication research that has remained disproportionately centered on national arenas and Western contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that media framing of Sherly Tjoanda's leadership does not remain confined to gender symbolism but progressively evolves toward technocratic and moral-administrative legitimacy. The four analyzed news articles reveal a consistent chronological pattern: a symbolic phase (gender milestone), a managerial phase (100-day performance agenda), an executive phase (hospital upgrade initiative), and a moral governance phase (fiscal accountability enforcement). This trajectory forms what this study conceptualizes as *sequential framing of legitimacy*.

Theoretically, these findings extend Pan and Kosicki's (1993) framing model by incorporating temporality as an analytical dimension. Framing operates not only at the structural level of text through syntactic, script, thematic, and rhetorical elements but also longitudinally, shaping political legitimacy over time. The shift from emotional expressions such as "moved" and "historic" to technical terminology such as "DAK/DAU allocation," "institutional upgrading," and "budget recovery" reflects a systematic transformation of frames.

From a political legitimacy perspective, the findings affirm that legitimacy in modern democracies cannot rely solely on symbolic identity but must be consolidated through policy performance and administrative governance (Suchman, 1995). The initial representational phase functions as a gateway to legitimacy, yet its sustainability depends on technocratic rationality and institutional accountability.

The study also contributes nuance to the gendered political framing literature. While previous research has documented media tendencies to maintain female politicians within emotional and identity-centered frames (Gibbons, 2022; Quinn Hegarty, 2025; Sazali & Basit, 2020), this study demonstrates that local media within decentralized democratic contexts can move beyond such stereotypes. In the case of Nuansamalut.com, gender symbolism functions as an initial legitimacy trigger rather than a limiting

boundary of representation.

Accordingly, this study offers two principal theoretical contributions. First, it introduces *sequential framing of legitimacy* as a longitudinal approach within political framing research. Second, it demonstrates that gender framing is neither inherently static nor reductive; under certain conditions, it may evolve into technocratic narratives when media consistently connect identity to policy outcomes and governance performance.

Academic Implications

This research opens new avenues for examining political framing at the subnational level, particularly within decentralized democratic systems. Gender-framing studies have largely focused on national-level politics and electoral campaigns. This study highlights the post-inauguration phase as a critical period in legitimacy formation, underscoring the central role of regional media in that process.

Methodologically, the findings emphasize the importance of longitudinal analysis in framing research. Rather than analyzing isolated news items, this study demonstrates that sequences of coverage can construct legitimacy trajectories. Such an approach may be applied to studies of female leadership in other regions to assess whether similar sequential patterns emerge. Furthermore, this research enriches Southeast Asian political communication scholarship by positioning local media as constructive actors in legitimacy production rather than mere reproducers of gender stereotypes.

Practical Implications

For journalistic practice, the findings indicate that media possess the capacity to construct political legitimacy constructively without perpetuating gender bias. Media coverage may begin by acknowledging symbolic milestones but should progressively develop narratives centered on policy substance and governance performance.

For female political leaders, the results suggest that identity symbolism can function as initial legitimacy capital, yet it must be reinforced by consistent technocratic performance to prevent legitimacy from remaining at a representational level. Within local democratic contexts, regional media occupy a strategic position as mediators of legitimacy between government institutions and the public. Consistent framing of policy effectiveness and accountability can strengthen public trust in governance institutions.

Limitations and Future Research Agenda

This study is limited to a single regional online media outlet and four news articles within the first three months of leadership. Consequently, the generalizability of the findings should be approached cautiously. Future research may expand the media sample, conduct comparative analyses across regional outlets, or examine the resonance of frames on public perception through survey-based or experimental framing designs. Subsequent research may also investigate whether the pattern of *sequential framing of legitimacy* is context-specific or represents a broader phenomenon in women's leadership within decentralized governance systems.

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