

# Information's Role in Emerging Democratic Societies: the Case of Indonesia

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***A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or, perhaps, both.***  
**-- James Madison**

Examining the historic role of information access in an emerging democracy offers an opportunity to qualify the potential value of information in its ability to transition, build, and sustain a democracy. In the case of the Republic of Indonesia, we can also evaluate the impact that electronic distribution of information has had in the country's efforts toward self-determination and development. For library professionals, understanding the obstacles to free access to information in an historic and political context can provide a valuable tool for recognizing where and why communities are not accessing necessary resources and provide insights as to how we might better meet the information needs of developing communities.

## **A Brief History of Public Information in Indonesia**

Indonesia's relationship with information has historically been linked to a ruling political power determining the output of information as a means of maintaining political hegemony. We can trace the first major output of information arriving on the islands through the colonial Dutch newspapers that emerged in the 1850's. Indonesian, Javanese and Chinese language papers soon followed and Dutch colonists were quick to recognize the potential of indigenous language newspapers for spreading nationalist ideologies that conflicted with their own. In response, a series of laws and regulations were created to control the dissemination of information. The most restrictive of these were the *Haatzaai Atrikelen* (Sowing of Hatred Articles) followed by the 1931 Press Act. Both could be used to silence anyone perceived of "disturbing 'public order' or spreading 'hatred' or dissent against the government." (Hill, 1) Publicly endorsed as a necessary social stabilizing mechanism, the legislation would become a model for censorship that would continue to plague the Republic for decades.

After establishing independence in 1945, Indonesia experienced a series of short-lived governments resulting in a brief respite from such tight control of the press. However, the new and popularly exercised freedom quickly came to a close with the installation of Indonesia's first president, Sukarno. Faced with civil unrest, Sukarno declared martial law and, within a year, had carried out over 125 acts of suppression against the press, including interrogations of journalists, detentions, and newspapers closures. (Basorie, 66) Sukarno's "Guided Democracy" borrowed themes from his colonial predecessors; most notably that the suppression of a free press was necessary to create social stability. Before ceding power to Suharto in 1967, Sukarno signed a revised Press Act into law. Chapter 9, Article 20.1a required that editors obtain an SIT (*Surat Izin Terbit* or

Permit to Print) from the Ministry of Information's military security authority any time the state was 'in transition'.

## **FREE BUT RESPONSIBLE**

Suharto's "New Order" was an effort to create a growth-oriented, modern Indonesia through an authoritarian political system. Striving to create a national consensus devoid of any dissent, Suharto implemented the *Paket Lima UU Politik* (Package of Five Political Laws). (Hikam, 6) The laws of the package stressed the need to place all political and social forces under the direct supervisory control of the executive Government. Under the guise of "protecting the rural masses from political manipulation of the competing parties", the strategy limited the operation of dissident political parties forming at the district level by requiring that all interest groups receive government approval of their elected leaders and permit monitoring and surveillance of the groups by the executive Government. (7) Unique to Suharto's legacy was his understanding of how print and broadcast medias could be used to promote his political ideologies. He created a social marketing strategy that required the press to be 'free but responsible'. In practice, the combination of social marketing and *Paket Lima UU Politik* meant that approved articles on agricultural development, family planning and economic prosperity were circulating, while simultaneously suppressing political dissent and social unrest.

To implement his social marketing system, Suharto instated an anti-subversion law, which made the dissemination of works that "arouse hostility, cause splits, conflict, chaos, disturbances, or anxiety" a crime punishable by death. (Committee, 2) Statements critical of the President or Vice President were strictly prohibited. (Article 134, 2) By January 1974, Suharto had dismantled twelve publications and arrested 470 individuals. (Hill, 5) The arrested consisted primarily of activists, journalists, and students, forming an unforeseeable alliance that would play a crucial role in future events.

Suharto's administration continued to find ways control information design and distribution. In 1975, the Indonesian Journalists Association (PWI) became the only officially sanctioned journalist organization. As such, membership became compulsory for practicing journalists and editors were forced to accept the new government regulations. (Basorie, 68) Any remains of a free press were completely dismantled by 1982. Sukarno's 1966 Press Act, which had continued to allow for provisions on the press only during transitional times, was revised to mandate licensing from the Ministry of Information regardless of political climate. (67) The new license, SIUPP (*Surat Izin Usaha Penerbitan Pers* or Press Publication Enterprise Permit) became one of the most powerful tools in controlling the activities of the press. The distinct difference between the SIT and the SIUPP was that the later was directed at press corporations, rather than individual publications. One journalist explained, "Now they can shut down the parent company and all its subsidiaries, break you financially, and knock you out of play for good... The SIUPP is your blood vein, and once it's cut, its over." (Committee, 11) And unlike the SIT permits that were temporarily revoked, all revocations of SIUPP permits were permanent. Often revocation occurred on the grounds of breaking the "SARA rules". These rules barred journalists from reporting on sensitive topics thought to incur civil unrest. Any coverage of issues surrounding ethnic (*Suku*), religious (*Agama*), racial (*Ras*), or social (*Antar*

*golongan*) tensions were subject to SIUPP revocation. (7) At the same time, foreign reporters were being denied visas to enter the country or extensions on their visas, some were expelled from the country, and others denied access to sensitive areas of the country. (16) Authorities also began censoring articles from incoming internationally recognized publications. (18) Yet despite the severe increase in government scrutiny and interference in the press, the newspaper industry was booming. In 1978 there were approximately 5 million newspapers in circulation. That figure more than doubled to reach 11.7 million by the end of 1990. (Hill, 8) Free speech may have been stifled, but Suharto's social marketing strategy was definitely circulating.

## **1994**

On June 21st, 1994 three leading publications, *Tempo*, *Detik*, and *Editor*, were banned on charges of "spreading hatred toward the government" and tensions between the press, public, and government were gathering steam. (HRW, 1) In the days following the ban, demonstrations comprised of journalists, intellectuals, student activists, and non-governmental organizations broke out throughout Indonesia. According to a Human Rights Watch report, troops wearing black t-shirts with the words *Operasi Bersih* (Cleaning Operation) written across their chests, beat unarmed demonstrators with rattan whips. (8) Seven weeks after the ban, an independent group of journalists formed the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) despite expulsion from PWI and subsequent arrests. (Alatas, 156) Their tenacious reporting and dissemination of information regarding the political situation, backed by student activists, NGOs, and intellectuals, helped to inform the global community about the severe and consistent human rights violations occurring within the Republic. Many of these journalists reported a growing sense of exhaustion and weariness as a result of their continued efforts to protect freedom of speech. It was at precisely this time that the Internet made its way to Indonesia.

## **The Internet, Economics, and the Fall of Suharto**

While Suharto had a firm grasp on the impact of traditional media, he had little understanding of the potential of the Internet. Budiono Darsono, editor of Detik.com, stated, "The regime seemed to be ignorant of the power of the Internet as a global network that allows vast and quick dissemination of information. They saw the Internet more as a bunch of computers..." (Winters, 114) Suharto failed to take into consideration the model of communication the Internet offers. Unlike the one-dimensional mode of communication offered by newspapers and broadcast media, the Internet allowed global information to flow rapidly in both directions without government scrutiny. The early partnership forged between journalists and students was strengthened by this new technology that was suddenly within their reach. Indonesian activists were becoming better informed through email and Internet articles, and at the same time used these tools to inform the international community about their crisis. Information was coming to light regarding the use of the military to kidnap and kill students previously involved in demonstrations, as well as other civilians involved in anti-Regime activities. (Suryadinata, 53) A journalist could easily use

the new technology to send a report that would reach thousands of listservs without procurement of permits or fear of punishment. Student activists, using university connections to the Internet, accessed this information to amplify support and organize demonstrations. The walls of the Indonesian parliament were being plastered with photocopied Internet articles *and* being updated almost hourly! (Winters, 117)

Concurrently, international scrutiny of Indonesia was becoming more intense. While Internet reports of human rights violations were on the rise, the value of the Rupiah was plummeting. Six months after the 1997 Asian economic crisis, the Rupiah dropped from Rp2,350 per U.S. dollar to Rp16,500 (Suryadinata, 43). With Suharto's children owning several financial institutions that flagrantly and repeatedly ignored International Monetary Fund (IMF) requirements, the rampant corruption and cronyism throughout Suharto's administration became too hard to ignore. The IMF soon agreed to global demands to remove funding for an irresponsible regime that denied free speech and supported the horrific human rights violations occurring in East Timor, Irian Jaya, and Aceh. All of this meant very bad business for the Republic's business elites; their currency was worth nothing and the global financial sector was increasingly uncomfortable doing business with them. The small elite business class joined the *reformasi* (reform movement) furthering the spread of information on the Internet via their global contacts. (Suryadinata, 52)

On May 21st 1998, Suharto resigned from office, explaining that under the current situation it was "very difficult to perform the tasks of government and [to promote] development of the country anymore". (50) Acting Vice President, B.J. Habibie, was chosen by Suharto to be his successor. Wildly unpopular by the majority of citizens during his year in office, Habibie tried desperately to distance himself from Suharto's legacy by establishing a 'real democracy' with both free press and free elections. (Djohan, 90) By September of 1999, Habibie created a new Press Act that abandoned all permit requirements and allowed journalists to join the professional organization of their choosing. Article 4 of the Act states, "the national press shall not be subject to censorship, press and broadcast bans, and shall have the right to seek, obtain and disseminate ideas and information." Equally impressive is Article 18, which states "any person who obstructs the press from doing its work to seek, obtain and disseminate information, or acts to censor or ban the press, could be prosecuted and face a maximum two years in prison or pay a fine of up to 500 million Rupiah (US\$50,000)." (Basorie, 70) With these new pieces of legislation in place, Indonesia had finally come into an era of free speech, exemplified by a 300 per cent increase in the numbers of daily and weekly publications. (Gazali, 133) The next step toward becoming a functioning democracy was for Indonesia to hold its first free and open elections. Prior to the June 7<sup>th</sup> 1999 General Election, only 33 per cent of Indonesians believed that Indonesia was a democracy and by August, that figure had more than doubled to 74 per cent. (539)

## **Growing Pains**

Democracy in the Republic of Indonesia is still very young, and the country is in a difficult state of transition. The legacy of more than a century of political censorship through colonial and authoritarian rule has stunted democracy's growth. In 2000, at least 118 acts of violence and harassment - including

physical assault, kidnapping and torture - were perpetrated against the press. Sadly, members of the general public had become responsible for carrying out these heinous acts. (Basorie, 73) This self-censoring behavior, while disappointing, is not unexpected. After so many years of censorship and information manipulated, Indonesians report difficulty evaluating the legitimacy of many information sources now at their disposal both online and in print.

The press needs to take some responsibility for advancing Indonesia's transition. The Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) found that "some members of the Indonesian media industry also appear to have a problem getting rid of certain bad habits they learned during the Soeharto era... Envelopes containing cash are still handed out at press conferences and other media events - and many reporters continue to take them." (74) PCIJ reports that low salaries are partly to blame for media corruption, but lack of transparency and accountability are also at fault. Opening meetings to public and professional scrutiny may offer a simple mechanism of diminishing media corruption and advancing transparency. Libraries are particularly well-positioned to meet many of these transitional needs. Staff can provide the much-needed information literacy training to address evaluation concerns by the press and public, as well as increase transparency by providing access to government information. Suharto and his predecessors may have been correct in viewing open information as a destabilizing mechanism; however the extent to which the instability has a negative impact on a society can be mitigated through increased information literacy education and transparency within government and public information agencies.

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