

Interreligious Dialogue through the Media: Perspectives and Limitations of Peace Journalism

Thomas Hanitzsch

ABSTRACT

Uprising clashes and conflicts among Indonesians originated from religious conflicts need an urgent interreligious dialogue. Media, as one of social system agent, is believed could facilitate those kind of dialogue. The concept being introduced here which fitted for such purpose is Peace Journalism. By definition, Peace Journalism is a program or frame of journalistic news coverage, which contributes to the process of making and protecting peace respectively the peaceful settlement of conflicts. The concept of Peace Journalism looks quite suitable especially for Asian and Islamic cultures where the purpose of communication is to generate social harmony and freedom (Hasnain, 1988). However, this concept also has limitations. Those limitations come from the complex relationship between journalism and society, and the challenges from journalism which served well for constructing realities. According to the author, there are five solutions could be achieved in order to maintain a fruitful interreligious dialogue facilitate by Peace Journalism. First, improvement on journalism education and further training for journalist. Second, a thoroughly and in-depth-research by scholars to provide external view on journalism and its operations that may induce self-correction. Third, the growth of "media journalism". Fourth, a strong press council to control the press. Fifth, and possibly most important, a reliable law system.

1. Introduction

In many parts of the Islamic World, Western values and beliefs – communicated through the media – proved to be increasingly relevant. On the other hand, there is a strong, sometimes radical resistance against Western values, articulated by Muslim organizations, which see their cultural identity in danger. They are concerned about the Islamic World losing its identity through a transformation moving to Western concepts of life and values. In that context, the September-11-attacks on the US and the military intervention in Afghanistan have given some reasons to many people around the world to re-define their position. Samuel P. Huntington's (1996) controversial prediction of a clash between civilizations experienced an occa-

sional revival in America and Europe.

The re-embedding of cultural identity within local contexts has led – as we can see in Indonesia – to the instrumental use of religion, in particular as a political instrument to mobilize voters and to strengthen political power, communicated through the media. But some people believe, that the media can contribute to de-escalate and pacify conflicts. These considerations finally have given raise to a new concept in journalisms, which is called "Peace Journalism".

This concept will be discussed and evaluated in this session according to its perspectives and limitations. *First*, I will take the crisis in the Moluccas (Maluku) as an example in order to illustrate the complex interaction between the dynamics of social conflict and mass media. *Second*, the

concept of Peace Journalism will be introduced shortly. *Third*, I will discuss the limitations to Peace Journalism by assessing the relationship between journalism and society as well as journalism and the construction of reality. *Fourth* and last, I will try to draw a conclusion on the usefulness of a normative concept like Peace Journalism.

2. The Moluccas: Mutual Reinforcement

George Yeo (2001: 64) once drew inspiration from Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty when he wrote: "Media coverage changes the reality it covers." In terms of crisis, the media can become a factor itself within the dynamics of conflict. Sometimes, the media may even stimulate terror just simply because of their existence: The Taliban, for example, might not have destroyed the Buddha statues in Bamiyan if it was not assured of extensive coverage by global media.

The case of the Moluccas is somehow different. I will use it to give an idea on how the complex interaction between the media and the conflict itself can lead into a vicious circle. There have been two spheres affected, the local (1) and the national (2) sphere.

(1) Until 1999, the newspaper *Suara Maluku* has been the only one daily published in Ambon, the core area of a bloody war involving the Christian (mainly Protestant) and Muslim population. Christian as well as Muslim journalists have been working side by side in *Suara Maluku* for years, although Christian journalists have been slightly over-represented due to the fact that the Muslim population in Ambon is holding a minority position (Eriyanto, 2002b).

When the war broke out, ethnical cleansing was happening everywhere in Ambon. As a result, Ambon had been divided into several Muslim and Christian territories. Coincidence or not, the location of the *Suara Maluku* office was situated within the Christian territory. Muslim journalists working

for *Suara Maluku* had no chance to make it to the editorial office because they had all reasons to believe that they will be killed as they enter Christian territory. Finally, they were forced to submit their reports through facsimile.

Over the time it appears that to a high degree reports submitted by Muslim journalists did not get published since the editorial office of *Suara Maluku* was controlled by Christians who now shifted their editorial policy from independent to pro-Christian. Some days later, all names of Muslim journalists suddenly disappeared from the masthead.

At this stage, pragmatic reasons led the main shareholder of *Suara Maluku*, the Surabaya-based *Jawa Pos Group*, to decide to split the newspaper into a Christian and a Muslim paper. Therefore, the *Ambon Ekspres* was born, representing the interests of the Muslim minority. As a result, the Christian population was reading news and reports about the good Christians slaughtered by the evil Muslims, provided by *Suara Maluku*, and the Muslim population was reading news and reports about the good Muslims slaughtered by the evil Christians, provided by *Ambon Ekspres*. This shows, how the media can accelerate crises and conflicts. I call it *mutual reinforcement and amplification of crisis*.

(2) For the national context, the media coverage on the conflict in the Moluccas has faced many research efforts, in particular those carried out by the *Institute of the Study on the Free Flow of Information (ISAI)* in Jakarta. So take, for example, a comparison between two national dailies: *Kompas*

and *Republika*. *Kompas* is read by around 80 percent of the Indonesian journalists, *Republika* is holding the second position in the ranking of dailies with 40 percent (see Table 1). Therefore, both papers can be regarded as very influential.

How did *Kompas* cover the conflict in the Moluccas? The paper, origi-

Table 1.
Top 5 of the Daily Newspapers Read
by Indonesian Journalists

No.	Newspapers	%
1	Kompas	80 %
2	Republika	40 %
3	Media Indonesia	38 %
4	The Jakarta Post	19 %
5	Bisnis Indonesia	19 %

n = 371

nally founded by Javanese Catholics but nevertheless independent, has been very cautious in reporting the crisis (Sudibyo 2000b). *Kompas* primarily used government officials as sources and avoided provoking statements expressed by Christians or Muslims (Qodari 2000). The paper even held back crucial issues and occurrences from news coverage since they may raise the anger of certain social groups (Eriyanto, 2000a).

On the contrary, the Islam-leaning *Republika*, founded with the help of the *Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals* (ICMI), clearly sided with the Muslim minority in Ambon. The paper even enthusiastically welcomed calls for *Islamic Jihad* in order to help the Muslims fighting in Ambon (Eriyanto, 2000a; Sudibyo, 2000b). Some observers of the Indonesian media scene believe that *Republika* lost a lot of its reputation as quality newspaper by aligning with Muslim hardliners.

If national media coverage in a multiethnic and multi-religious country like Indonesia side with one party in a certain conflict, we face the danger of a *metastasis* of crisis, effecting territories outside of the core area. Two years ago, the conflict in the Moluccas spread to Lombok, which is next to Bali, the biggest asset of the Indonesian tourism industry. For some days, Lombok has been in the middle of a war, which results in a dozen of churches burned down and a panic-stricken evacuation of tourists.

3. The Concept of “Peace Journalism”

If the media can contribute to accelerate and extend crises and conflicts, they should be able to help settling conflicts, too. Similar to the concept of Development Journalism, Peace Journalism emerged from a normative view on what media do and what they should do. By Definition: *Peace Journalism is a program or frame of journalistic news coverage, which contributes to the process of making and protecting peace respectively the peaceful settlement of conflicts.* This implies that Peace Journalism does not just simply mean the outcome of journalistic work, but also refers to how journalists act and perceive their role in re-

porting conflict. The concept of Peace Journalism looks quite suitable especially for Asian and Islamic cultures where the purpose of communication is to generate social harmony and freedom (Hasnain 1988).

What does Peace Journalism mean in the daily work of a reporter? Johan Galtung and Richard C. Vincent, drawing on the coverage of the second Gulf war in 1991, came up with 10 practical suggestions to journalists (Vincent/Galtung, 1993: 182):

1. Cover both sides.
2. Push to get access to locations, people and topics.
3. Don't stick to elites as news sources.
4. Avoid glorifying warfare technology.
5. Don't cut out “blood and guts”-stories since they show the real horrors of war.
6. Publish accounts on “ordinary” people.
7. Provide background information.
8. Be aware of spin-doctors who try to manipulate you.
9. Accounts on how media or journalists cover conflicts should not push the actual conflict aside.
10. Communicate and support peace initiatives.

4. Limitations to “Peace Journalism”

As we can experience every day by consuming different media, news coverage is characterized by a high degree of contingency. I try to illustrate this thesis by examining two dimensions: (1) the complex relationship between journalism and society and (2) journalism and the construction of reality.

4.1 Journalism and Society

By stressing second order systems theory, mainly developed by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1995), social reality can be described by looking at the relationships between social systems. Social systems emerge when the degree of social complexity became so high that it could only be managed by highly specialized systems with specific and exclusive tasks. This process is called *functional differentiation*. Each system is process-

ing complexity according to its own rules and structures. That makes systems quite hard to control from “outside”.

This description also applies to journalism: In democratic societies, other systems like politics, economy, law or science have very limited access to journalism because journalism is operating according to its own means and function (Kohring, 1997; Luhmann, 2000; Scholl & Weischenberg, 1998). It is still discussed controversial what the function of journalism is, but many scholars believe that the social function of journalism is *to make self-observation of the society possible* (Weischenberg, 1995). In other words: Through journalism the society takes a look at itself. This implies that it cannot be the task of journalism to provide freedom since this is the task of another system that may be politics or – to some degree – the military (Goerke & Kollbeck, 1996).

The process of functional differentiation, however, is not completed yet. Because of its superior position, the *politics* still can have some significant effect on journalism. So happened in the US, when the press freedom was restricted to some degree after the government declared war on global terrorism (Neuber, 2002).

The *military* actually is reducing the elbowroom for war reporters since the Pool System was used first time during the US-invasion in Panama. Only selected journalists who pass a security check have access to a Pool, traveling into battle areas is only allowed with military accompaniment. Reporters have only limited access to the war scene (MacArthur, 1992). Apparently, this access is rather granted to other people: The Hollywood-producers Van Munster und Jerry Bruckheimer who have produced patriotic movies like “Pearl Harbor” and “Black Hawk Down” could visit all battle scenes in Afghanistan when they prepared the reality-TV serial “Profiles from the Front Line”, broadcasted in ABC.

But sometimes also journalists and media can become a target of attacks carried out by the *audience*. In Indonesia we can witness an anarchic tendency to the use of force or even violence by some interest groups if they simply don’t like what they

read in the newspaper or watch in TV. This forced many media in Indonesia to report issues related to Islam and Muslim affairs over-cautious. In the past, editorial offices have been burned down, had to stop publishing temporarily or have been forced to build a mosque. Two years ago, the *Defenders Front of Islam* (FPI), a group of radical Muslims, even forced the private TV channel SCTV to stop the rerun of the very popular Mexican TV-serial “Esmeralda” because of a malicious character whose name was “Fatima”. (Fatima has been the youngest daughter of the prophet Muhammad.)

The dynamic interaction between journalism and what is called *public opinion* can spontaneously raise restrictions to press freedom, too. A clear example was given by the US after the September-11-attacks when the public opinion brought itself unprompted into one single line. Robert W. McChesney (2002: 16) described the atmosphere as follows: “a benevolent, democratic and peace loving nation was brutally attacked by insane evil terrorists who hate the United States for its freedoms and affluent way of life. The United states must immediately increase its military and covert forces, locate the surviving culprits and exterminate them”. No wonder that CBS-moderator Dan Rather stated patriotically: “Wherever the president wants me to go, I will go.” Bill Maher from ABC caused some trouble when he contradicted George W. Bush’s assertion that the terrorists from September 11 have been “cowards”. Shortly after that, two major companies terminated their sponsoring contract. One of them was *FedEx* (Neuber, 2002). Under these circumstances there is clearly no Peace Journalism to grow.

4.2 Journalism and Construction of Reality

It is also possible to look at journalism by observing journalists as acting individuals. This is actually what most empirical studies on journalism do, whether they mention it or not. By stressing a modern, constructivist view on social acting, any media output is a result of a process of multiple selections and highly contingent constructions (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Schmidt, 1994;

Weischenberg, 1995). Nobody possesses the “absolute truth”. By covering news, journalists provide just one version of the reality, but as a matter of fact there are many versions of the reality, one as “true” as the others.

The way how reality gets constructed by somebody is dependent on many factors: personal experience, professional education, expectations, feelings, circumstances of a certain situation, etc. If we look at the general level of formal education among Indonesian journalists, we will find an extremely low average within local newspapers and tabloids. Moreover, the level of education is sharply decreasing from the urban areas of industrial concentration down to less developed provinces. Altogether, about 18 percent of the interviewed population of journalists has no professional education at all. Surprisingly after all, 58 percent of the Indonesian journalists have some kind of professional education that is relevant to journalism. But an evaluation, carried out in 1999, could prove that the Indonesian journalism education – as the most important institution to maintain quality in journalism – needs a total overhaul. The findings showed constant interventions of the government in educational matters, a lack of didactic conceptions and almost no discussion of quality in journalism between educators (Hanitzsch, 2001).

On the other hand, *corruption* is quite widespread between journalists in Indonesia who actually make no secret out of it. From the 385 journalists we have interviewed in North Sumatra, Jakarta and Yogyakarta, 44 percent do justify and over 50 percent do actually practice corruption more or less frequently. That means that some of them practice corruption even though they do not justify it. But most striking was the fact that the pay – contrary to all expectations – is not a main reason for accepting money or valuable presents

from news sources. The data did not indicate that justifying corruption would decline significantly when the pay is increased. Interesting too is our finding that the most corrupt journalist are likely to work for government or public media.

However, one precondition for professional journalism to work properly is its independency. If journalists do accept money or other valuable pre-

Table 2
Practicing corruption

<i>Practice corruption ...</i>	Always or sometimes	Always refuse or accept first, but return later on
Public/government media (n = 13)	79 %	21 %
Private media (n = 255)	38 %	62 %

sents from news sources, they are about to lose their independency and, therefore, are getting very close to Public Relations.

5. Conclusion

Naswil Idris, a colleague from Indonesia, once stated that the mass media play a culpable role in stimulating aggressiveness within the audience. To avoid chaos to people’s daily lives resulting from “too much” press freedom, he implicitly suggests to accept some degree of restricting press freedom (Idris, 2000: 92). This is, I think, not an option for a democratic society like Indonesia is about to grow.

Moreover, we have to be aware of the fact that media construct reality according to their own means and function. Because of its specific function in the society, it cannot be the task of journalism to free the world from crises, conflicts and other evils. Journalism has only limited access to matters that belong to other systems.

What I’m saying is: I do not have any doubt that Peace Journalism might be very valuable and helpful. But I’m asking: Do we really need a normative concept like Peace Journalism? If so, can we achieve it?

What is the solution I’m proposing here? I

suggest the use of already established instruments to promote and maintain quality in journalism. This could be, *first*, efforts to improve journalism education and further training. *Second*, through stimulating research on journalists and mass media, scholars could provide an external view on journalism and its operations that may induce some kind of self-correction. *Third*, journalism itself can do some introspection through what we call “media journalism”. Media journalism means coverage on media organizations and their coverage such as, for example, the column “Media” in Tempo magazine. *Fourth*, the media need an effective self-control carried out by media practitioners. This could be a independent, but nevertheless strong press council and a voluntary self-control of television broadcasters and the film industry. *Fifth*, and possibly most important, Indonesia needs a reliable law system. Even ordinary people need to have a chance to sue the press if they feel slandered by press coverage. Without a working law system, a democratic society cannot prevent its members from unprofessional press coverage.

Finally, we need to look at journalism as an intrinsic part of our society, not as something that is standing in opposition to it. Peace Journalism cannot be induced from “outside”, but only can evolve within a culture of peace. If we, for example, evaluate the concept of Development Journalism, emerged in the 1960s, and the empirical reality in the field, we won’t find much substantial evidence for the existence of such a Development Journalism. This has been proved by many research efforts particularly in India.

Journalists are members of a specific society, they are socialized within a specific cultural environment. If the society gets worse, journalism will do. If the society gets violent, journalism will do. We cannot demand something from journalism what we ourselves might not be willing to do. Instead of blaming journalism, it might be helpful to ask ourselves: What can we do to promote peace? What have we done so far?

Endnote:

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