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INSIGHT

Press faces new enemies lurking on the horizon

National Press Day will be celebrated this week. Sociologist Ariel Heryanto recalls experiences of the Indonesian press and looks at the challenges that lay ahead.

SALATIGA, C. Java (JP): The Indonesian press has found itself under the increasing threat of the ever-expanding power of electronic media. Such pervasive fear is attested to by an upcoming seminar in the Central Java town of Surakarta this Saturday.

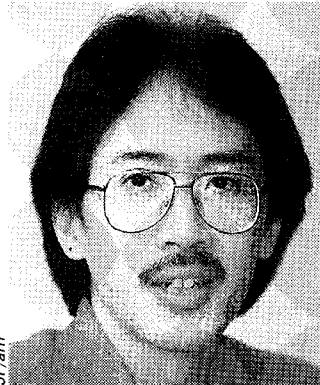
Representatives from print and electronic media will discuss what is viewed as the ill-fated press in the midst of an electronic media boom.

While the nature of the threat is open to debate, the common fear is in itself instructive. It marks a watershed in the nation's political, economic and technological history. In the greatest part of this century the Indonesian press saw itself as a heroic

figure, carrying out a mission of social liberation, modernity and progress. Its strongly-held convictions were to reveal the truth, educate the masses, and expose injustices. In short, journalism was a political activism.

Such vision is not merely an empty illusion. Before the 1980s, activism was still predominant in the work of Indonesian journalism. What made some journalists more notable than others was moral commitment, personal courage, integrity and charisma. Professionalism or formal training and qualifications came much later, as did enormous capital and huge profits.

The public's enchantment



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with the activist-cum-journalist was considerably enhanced by severe state censorship that characterized colonial societies before World War II, and the Second and Third Worlds after the War. Information was not

only scarce, but limited and regulated. Truth was inaccessible to the public, or too dangerous for public discussion.

That atmosphere was more a product of state monopoly of information and suppression than technological shortcomings. The notorious *haatzaai artikelen* (Dutch colonial penal codes that prosecuted anyone for expressing disrespect, hatred or hostility towards state agents in public) was designed and vigorously reinforced specifically to target nationalistic journalists in the East Indies.

Now that's all history. But the *haatzaai artikelen* is still alive and kicking in today's Indonesia, although after 1973 its main target shifted from journalists to student activists. Today few journalists have any idea what *haatzaai artikelen* is. What is responsible for the change

and how?

The New Order is undoubtedly responsible for the sustained growth of capitalism during the past three decades. Ironically, its success has denied the state all-encompassing, monopolistic power. Increasingly it must share power and rely on cooperation with the emergent bourgeoisie and urban middle class professionals. Privatization, deregulation, openness and democratization have become new key words since the 1980s in lieu of development, stability, order, defense and national resilience.

Power

The state has less and less power or interest in suppressing information and banning news publications. When last banned publications, it found it was no longer as easy to get

away with as it was during the first two decades of its rule. If anything threatens the old-idealized personification of the Indonesian press today, it may no longer be the Ministry of Information or the Military Information Center.

In 1986 the state gave up its monopoly over television stations. By 1995 the number of private television networks rose to five. They all but made the state-owned television company obsolete. With the launching of private television networks, the state eased restrictions on televised commercials. More recently it chose to ignore the as yet unlicensed, independently-produced news items on private television and radio. In 1994 it announced the most pro-market decree, allowing foreign capital to run businesses in sensitive areas, including mass media.

Like everything else, no

social change takes place without twists and exceptions. The notorious June 1994 media ban can be seen to run counter to the argument above. However, the same event can be read to indicate the state's uncontrolled paranoia in encountering its painful but inevitable decline.

If the state is no longer a sole threat to the contemporary Indonesian press, what is? Greed is one. Competition among media entities is another. Intermedia war will probably be more fierce in the years to come. What is at stake is not simply a slice of advertisement revenues, but new authority of producing and narrating truth. Global Internet has compounded the whole situation, making the battle more chaotic.

The writer is a sociologist based in Salatiga.