Special Report

Exploring the Complexity of Cross Cultural Research

Nurhaya Muchtar
Jeffrey A. Ritchey

Abstract

This paper reflects upon the challenges of conducting cross cultural research projects. Specifically, it utilizes a recent research project exploring press freedom in contemporary Indonesia as a framework for discussing both the importance of cross cultural projects and the difficulties of working across cultural, linguistic, and disciplinary boundaries.

Introduction

The field of adult education extends into various other disciplines that have, as part of their interest, how mature human beings come to make meaning of their experiences. This was formally recognized more than a decade ago when Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where we both teach, established a master's degree program taught collaboratively by faculty in the university's Department of Adult and Community Education and Department of Communications Media. This program, focusing primarily on technological applications for teaching adults, has enabled faculty from two complementary yet distinct fields to interact on curricular, administrative, and scholarly projects.

After much discussion, the authors began such a project, examining the changing role of journalists in contemporary Indonesia. This study examined both the nature of journalistic practice and the means by which journalists were coming to understand and make meaning of their new social and professional roles.

Nurhaya Muchtar is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communications Media at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. **Jeffrey A. Ritchey** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Adult & Community Education at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

The results of this work were twofold: first, a more complete understanding of the forces shaping journalistic identity in contemporary Indonesia; and second, a greater sensitivity to the potential rewards and inherent challenges of conducting cross cultural research projects. What follows is both a reflection on the project-its goals, methods, and outcomes-and a discussion of the complexity of working in such exciting yet uncertain territory.

Background

In developing countries, like Indonesia, the role of journalists has traditionally been seen as educational in nature. The authoritarian government that ruled the country for 32 years drastically limited journalistic practice thus creating a unique and powerful identity for the field and its practitioners—mandating a form of "development journalism" that aimed to support government policies and practices. The collapse of the Suharto government in 1998 necessitated the emergence of a new form of journalism. Suddenly, journalists were expected not only to report news and information objectively but also to actively participate in a "free press" that demanded increasing mastery of contemporary media technologies within a more market-driven professional context. The ensuing search for a new journalistic identity in Indonesia paralleled a global "identity crisis" of sorts in the profession (Jensen, 2003, p. 1) as journalists struggled to negotiate their role in a field increasingly focused on profit and shaped by broader, technologically-driven levels of participation. The initial purpose of this study was to explore and better understand journalists' perceptions of their professional practice (including requisite technological skills and social/civic responsibilities) with a special focus on what might be called "pre-Reform" versus "post-Reform" journalistic traditions—the former grounded in "development journalism," the later seeing journalists as the public's "critical watchdog" (Hanitzsch, 2005). Such an examination seemed prudent given the general perception that Indonesia's press was now, for all intents and purposes, "free."

From 1997 to 2003, the process of creating a free press had been facilitated by organizations like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), Voice of America (VOA), and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) who offered assistance to train journalists for entry into the free market. These projects, however, were primarily for radio journalists,

included no plans for sustainability, and often left behind an even greater need for journalism education than existed prior to their inception. As Western aid began leaving Indonesia in 2000, the formal education of journalists was left to short courses and training at polytechnic institutes.

In summer 2010, we began a series of interviews with 10 Jakarta-based print, radio, and television journalists. Sessions were conducted primarily in Jakarta with participants drawn from an existing network of contacts assembled in a prior research study. The sample included men and women of various ages and varying levels of experience. All interviews were audio taped, conducted in Indonesian, translated into English, and coded (in NVivo) using a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

From these discussions, it was quickly apparent that more non-formal educational processes were playing a primary role in the creation of journalistic practice and the development of a modern journalistic identity in Indonesia. As a result, this work shifted its focus to examine these more communal ways of learning and their impact on shaping journalism in contemporary Indonesia.

Journalistic Identity in Contemporary Indonesia

The Indonesian government has a long history of enforcing the notion of a *pancasila* or "responsible' press." The concept was initially adopted by developing countries as a way to reject Western ideas as well as to encourage economic, social, and cultural progress. Romano (2003) asserts that this concept is not really different from Western journalistic practice, especially in terms of the media providing supports for educational and human development initiatives. Nevertheless, a *pancasila* press takes these activities one step further, establishing as legitimate a "guided free and responsible press" and framing journalism's role as that of "community keeper" not "community watchdog." Romano (2003) described Indonesia's *pancasila* press as having two sides: one teaching modernity, promoting economic development, and encouraging society to be open-minded; the second, protecting the "authentic" Indonesia through the promotion of family values, an appreciation for spirituality, and obedience to the country's rulers.

Romano (2003) argued that 32 years of New Order governance had a profound influence on Indonesian journalists' collective frame of mind. Based on her survey of journalists in Java in the late 1990s, she described how government restrictions shaped journalists' ways of thinking and

professional practice. Her analysis revealed that most journalists saw themselves as a "keeper" rather than a "watchdog" of society. Hanitzsch (2005) affirmed Romano's analysis, emphasizing that "During the New Order regime, which ruled the country for three decades, the power elites obviously succeeded in their efforts to systematically depoliticize journalism" (p. 499).

In contrast, Morrell (2005) noted that Indonesia's press has also been viewed as a somewhat "heroic institution" (p. 129). The field's connection to the independence movement and its resistance to New Order controls seemed to set the stage for journalism's active participation in "a vibrant and independent" post-Suharto media environment (Kauffman, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

This study sought to add richer, more intimate forms of data to the examination of journalistic identity in Indonesia. For this work, identity formation was perceived as relating to the "formation of the person" (Wenger, 1998, p. 13) as well as to the "creation and use of markers of membership, rites of passage and social categories" (p. 13) relevant to such things as professional role. Furthermore, identity was seen as something that is changing, fluid, and developing as part of human engagement with culture and history (Wenger, 1998, p. 13).

Three interrelated theoretical threads provided the framework for this exploration. The first was critical theory—specifically, the sociological perspective typically identified with the Institute for Social Research. Critical theory's utility as a means to interrogate power and its manifestation in social settings would seem particularly useful for this research.

The second related thread was cultural imperialism theory, which posits that, "in a free market, the economically powerful will become more powerful while the poor will get poorer," and that "further concentration of media ownership will influence and reduce the variety, plurality, and type of messages in the media" (McPhail, 2009, p. 24). Cultural imperialism asserts that dominant cultures use media as a political tool, colonizing and controlling without the antiquated tactic of physically occupying spaces with military personnel.

The third thread was communities of practice social learning theory (Wenger, 1998). The notion of "communities of practice" was first presented by Lave and Wenger (1991) and popularized in the areas of business and industry. Wenger primarily focuses on learning as

social participation—a process that includes engagement in the practices of communities and "constructing identities in relation to these communities" (Wenger, 1998, p. 151).

Themes

As noted earlier, the journalists interviewed for this work were based primarily in Jakarta. Educational attainment and levels of experience varied greatly, as did age. Nevertheless, these descriptive differences appeared to have little impact on participants' responses and reflections. In other words, the themes noted below were pervasive in our discussions.

Technological Change: Ease and Superficiality

Much has been written regarding technology's impact on the field of journalism. The monumental impact of Internet-based, participatory forms of information sharing has resulted in a sense of uncertainty as to what really constitutes journalistic competency and practice. Technological change in general and the Internet in particular were powerful themes in our discussions with contemporary Indonesian journalists. These themes focused both on the challenges posed by rapidly (and perpetually) changing skill sets as well as the deeper ethical and philosophical shifts these changes were perceived to precipitate.

Technological skill was linked to both the quality of the journalistic product and the speed with which it could be produced. Regardless of medium (print, radio, or television), technology's greatest impact was seen as providing the ability for journalists to rapidly produce engaging, accessible stories. Reflecting on media's wider impact on consumer attention, one participant (#5) noted that "the nature of multimedia is fast...reporters also have to follow that style and report things immediately...as fast as possible, ignoring in-depth analysis of the story." Said another (#10), "Today, most journalists use smartphones that allow them to download and upload stories wherever they are. However, the Blackberry also made them less creative in approaching stories. In the past, before we interviewed [someone] or reported an event, we came to the site early, found out what was going on, then started our report. Today, they just access the Internet and maybe change the first part or angle of the story. Journalists today don't dig as much...Their primary source is Google."

The complexity of this issue was born out in discussions of widely heralded participatory or social media sites like Twitter and Facebook. "Many journalists have their own blogs, so if people want to know more—say, for example, they want to get more insights about an event—they can go to other people's blogs and read it or follow people on Twitter. The blog includes more personal stories which can't be put in the media. Some journalists still carry their idealism but not through their [work] media...they channel it to different media [sites]" (#3). These sites not only allow for stories to be elaborated upon, but also provide locations where journalists can share experiences and insights, something that was seen not only as "cool" and "hip" but also enormously helpful to young journalists struggling to understand their own professional responsibilities. "We need to know what's going on," stated one participant (#3). "So checking Facebook and Twitter is a good way to know what's going on. For me, it's also a way to create a network. And the last thing is image...you just have to do what others are doing."

Television: Journalist as Celebrity

Both print and radio journalists noted what they perceived as a growing interest in television among aspiring, young journalists. This perceived interest was strongly linked to the "glamour" of television reporting and announcing in relation to the more mundane work of radio and print journalists. "There is a booming television industry" stated one participant (#5). "I think it's amazing that we have ten television stations with capability to cover nationally. I also think...our people...they tend to listen and watch rather than read. It's easier to listen and watch for information from television."

In such an environment, the image of "journalist as celebrity" appears to be taking hold. "I am happy to see the growing interest among young people toward media broadcasting," said one participant (#3), "although I am pretty sure that they would prefer television over radio. Television is more glamorous." This shift toward an entertainment-focused form of journalism appears intimately connected to the liberating effects of the free market and a loss of cultural capital among Suharto-era print and radio journalists. As many participants reflected on their professional lives, they noted their perception of journalism as "cool" or "adventurous" as a primary factor in career selection. One participant

(#4) stated flatly, "The idealism is gone." Said another (#5), "During the New Order government, journalists were seen as a symbol of the struggle to fight the status quo or autocracy. People enjoyed working for the media for that reason. Today, situations have changed. In the past, people looked up to this profession, but not anymore. People might see that media is booming so a lot of opportunities are available. The consequence of this situation is that people report without thinking ahead or thinking about any consequences. If you say that media is an agent of change, media is not supposed to follow the public…yes?"

The "Free" Press

The resignation of President Suharto in 1998 offered the hope of a free press actively engaged in the transformation of Indonesian social and political life. Nevertheless, while providing a more vibrant platform for such transformative events, the press's role in Indonesia has been seen as something of a "disappointment" (Morrell, 2005, p. 129). Some of the factors underlying this limited impact have been outlined in previous sections of this work. Participants in this study, however, repeatedly identified the free market interests of media owners as a powerful force in limiting journalism's capacity to impact Indonesian society. While alternative, internet-based journalistic activities have, indeed, created spaces to challenge and debate important cultural issues, the mainstream media remains a powerful force in shaping Indonesian journalistic identity.

This force is exerted in both the selection of stories for coverage and in the way events are presented. "Unlike in the past, we can report cases related to politicians without being afraid of being sued," stated one participant (#3). "So, that seems to be one aspect of liberation. On the other hand, most journalists are still afraid to report stories that deal with people who have money." Said another (#4), "They don't dare report cases related to any kinds of conflict such as religious conflict. They don't want to write stories that can boomerang. I think it's related to money. It's related to ownership."

Coupled with the perceived shift toward a more entertainment-oriented journalism, owner control was clearly implicated in a loss of journalistic power. "Owners took full control of the media," said one participant (#4). Stated another (#6), "It's not so much a code of ethics that influences our work but the management."

Weak Professional Associations

Shortly after Suharto's resignation in 1998, the Indonesian government established various press restrictions meant to maintain relative calm during a tempestuous time. These restrictions were widely supported by the public as necessary to maintain order and limit the possibility of inflammatory or overly partisan news reporting.

Since that time (as noted above), media owners have played a similar role, albeit to promote their own financial gain. In response to this, the last dominant theme expressed by the participants in this work was the need for more powerful associations of journalists to both defend professional rights and define professional competencies. "Let me tell you about TV station owners," said one participant (#9). "Most of them have no understanding of the media. They are bankers and entrepreneurs. Some of them own palm oil companies, others have oil companies. Their main goal in owning media is to diversify their business." The result has been a perceived decline in the quality of journalism and an increased sense of powerlessness among journalists to select and present their stories with authenticity and candor.

More powerful journalistic associations were seen as a means to help establish clearer separation between ownership and news divisions and to develop clear, universal, professional standards for the field. While associations exist in Indonesia, most prominently *Aliansi Jurnalis Independen* (AJI), the Alliance of Independent Journalists, they were generally perceived of as weak, peripheral organizations that neither shape journalistic practice nor appeal to younger, aspiring journalists who see "codes of ethics" and "competencies" as unimportant. "All I want to see is that more journalists are involved in organizations," stated one participant (#4). "I think journalism associations are a way for journalists to get power. Without them, we will continue to be suppressed by owners."

Journalism in Contemporary Indonesia

Civil society in general and democratic governance in particular has long been linked to the development of a vibrant, vigilant free press. Journalism has typically been regarded as necessary "to keep our leaders honest and to arm the powerless with the information they need to protect themselves against the tyranny of the powerful, whether that tyranny is political or commercial" (Moyers, 2001, para. 11). Such practice is kindred to (if not part of) the radical, emancipatory traditions so critical

to the field of adult education. That said, exploring the current state of journalistic practice in transitional democratic nations and better understanding ways to enhance and facilitate the resistance of "political or commercial" tyranny seems of great importance.

Recent revolutionary moments throughout the world (e.g., Iran, Egypt, Tunisia) have revealed the power of participatory journalism to both educate and instigate civic action. Twitter and Facebook, as well as myriad blogging and photo-sharing sites allow people throughout the world to interact with both speed and intensity. These virtual spaces have become important sites of public pedagogy throughout the world.

Saeed (2009) noted that "it is hard to conceive of a strong democracy without placing communication at the centre of things" (p. 466). And indeed, media in general and journalism in particular are flourishing in contemporary Indonesia. Communication, as it were, is alive and well. Nevertheless, our interviews pointed out that merely increasing the amount and variety of information, as well as the speed with which it can be attained, did not necessarily promote the kind of critical, rational, political thinking that journalistic practice has historically seen as central to its work. Indeed, much of the "free" journalistic space created with the resignation of Suharto, had been colonized by corporate interests whose primary concern was in creating "more consumers than citizens in the public sphere" (Saeed, 2009, p. 471). Such a world "encourages people to seek private solutions to public problems by purchasing a commodity" (Murdock as quoted in Saeed, p. 471).

The reform era that began in 1998 brought enormous change not only in journalistic practice but also in media ownership. Yet while the number of media outlets increased rapidly, old practices of ownership and oligopoly continued to exist (albeit in less visible ways). To make the situation worse, cross ownership opportunities increased the potential for business owners to control media as a means for improving their non-media organization's bottom line. For example, Bimantara Citra (a company with extensive ties to the Suharto family) owns three national television stations and four radio stations while Kompas Gramedia (the largest media conglomerate in Indonesia) has cross media ownership that ranges from book publication, bookstores, magazines, television, and national private radio to its seven affiliates across the country (Sudibyo, 2007).

In addition, the Suharto government limited the number of journalistic associations, giving recognition to only *Persatuan Wartawan Indo-*

nesia (PWI), the Indonesian Journalists Association, and pressuring individuals involved with other journalism associations by revoking their professional licenses, terminating their employment, or sending them to jail. "Freedom" has not resulted in a subsequent groundswell of journalistic organizing sufficient to challenge corporate interests.

Wenger notes that communities of all kinds are predicated on a process of legitimate peripheral participation--i.e., "the process by which newcomers become included in a community of practice" (1998, p. 100), including changing patterns of participation and the transformation of identity. With weak professional associations and relatively limited Internet penetration (12.3 percent as of June 30, 2010 [Internet Usage in Asia]), consumer-driven, entertainment-focused journalistic practice has asserted itself as a major framework for young journalists' conceptions of their professional roles.

While the limited scope of this study demanded prudent "conclusions," it did point to the potential for journalists to assert their capacity to define their professional field, alter cultural perceptions of their potential social role, and creatively utilize participatory forms of media to engage in an active process of community building. Such a process is fundamentally educative and a potential site for work by activist adult educators interested in fostering democratic processes. Part of this will involve facilitating the difficult task of identifying what is "legitimate" in contemporary journalistic practice, challenging the less identifiable but no less hegemonic structures that currently weaken and limit truly free speech, while remaining sensitive to the cultural distinctions that make Indonesia unique. It speaks to Crawford's (2001) assertion that press freedom is intimately tied to the creation of a civically-engaged public and the powerful role that adult educators might play in this work.

So What Just Happened?: The Complexity (and Importance) of Cross Cultural Research

The data for this work was gathered during summer 2010, with the subsequent fall and spring spent transcribing, organizing, analyzing and compiling the relevant materials. This process, including several writing projects and presentations, impressed upon us the various rewards and challenges associated with cross cultural research. These conclusions are supported by the observations of others (Ford, Moore, Whiting, & Grantham, 2007; Liamputtong, 2008; Papadopoulos & Lees, 2002); nevertheless, there is a clear lack of empirical research on the process of

conducting research across cultures particularly as it relates to diversity among researchers. Closer examination of these processes seems important given the increasingly global nature of our work.

The Challenge of Discipline

While the authors' two fields of study-media and adult education--have a well-established relationship, these fields also have unique and somewhat discrete theories and literatures that guide and shape their respective directions. This reality required us not only to expand our understanding of new and sometimes similar theoretical frameworks, but to spend considerable time discussing the subtleties of our disciplines to find scholarly connections capable of framing our collaboration.

In a perfect world, such cross disciplinary work would appear energizing and full of potential. And, indeed, such was (and is) the case. The challenge, however, is in pursuing such work in the face of an increasingly time-sensitive, efficiency-obsessed culture. To better understand complementary scholarship requires not only a commitment to the time necessary to read and think through new research, but the humility to recognize the limitations of ones own disciplinary boundaries. It challenges us as researchers and practitioners to move (haltingly at times) beyond our comfort zones--oddly in the same spirit of exploration and discovery that we so passionately encourage in our own students. Such work is not simply to fill a publication niche, but is necessary to stretch the limits of our understanding, and create new, more rigorous, more contextually complete images of our world.

The Challenge of Language

This project was, by nature, bounded up in words--the words of journalists functioning in a changing professional environment; the words of researchers working in related, foundational areas of study; and the words exchanged as we struggled to better understand the materials we were gathering and analyzing. All too often, we were confronted with the reality that while using the same words, we were, at times, not in agreement as to what these words meant.

A simple example would be the phrase "free speech"--an idea foundational to this research. For Americans, free speech typically means that ideas, no matter how inflammatory, can and should be protected and allowed into the wider public discourse. In such a scenario, the "market-

place of ideas" will either affirm or refute the comments; a process best accomplished by public scrutiny and debate.

But in other cultures, inflammatory language may not fall under the banner of "free speech." The boundaries of such language are highly cultural in nature, and in a profoundly diverse context such as Indonesia (diverse as to class, race, ethnicity, language, nationality, and religion) discussing and understanding the subtleties associated with such a phrase as "free speech" was critical…and complex.

The Challenge of Culture

As can be seen from the preceding description of this project, the importance of history and geography to cross cultural study cannot be overstated. Since its inception as a field of study, adult education has promoted the importance of understanding the context of our professional practice. Such an understanding is equally important when engaging in cross cultural study--a process that may require significant preparation.

Indonesia's colonial past, the *pancasila* or "responsible press" of the Suharto regime, the participation of NGOs in promoting a "post Reform" free press, and the influence of free market capitalism and technological advances on contemporary journalism were all essential to fully accessing how Indonesian journalists understood their role.

Also important was developing a clear conception of this remarkable nation composed of over 17,000 islands, and home to some 300 ethnic groups, over 700 languages and dialects, and a variety of strong religious communities (Indonesia is the most populous Muslim nation in the world). Such complexity and the sensitivity it inspires concerning diversity's benefits and volatility, play a distinct role in "development journalism's" continuing influence.

The Challenge of Power and Control

Critical theory tells us that where there are human beings there will be issues of power and control. This is no less true in collaborative research projects. But perhaps more important, is how power and control manifests itself across the cultures represented in a given project, as well as how this manifestation impacts the research process.

Creating a truly collaborative environment requires researchers to critically reflect on their own closely held positions regarding research,

culture, history, and disciplinary boundaries. Such work is time consuming and often frustrating; nevertheless, it is essential to assuring that the outcome truly represents an authentic exploration of the relevant questions and contexts.

Listening, Learning and Growing

All of the above points to the value of listening, learning, and growing in a cross cultural context. A genuine desire to learn and a commitment to personal and professional growth are essential to cross cultural collaborations. For this project, cultivating such an environment began with reading one another's past scholarship, sharing relevant materials from our respective disciplines, discussing areas of interest and potential projects, and ultimately committing to the hard work of including new ideas into our own research and writing.

Such work is not always valued in professional settings that increasingly promote efficiency and speed; nevertheless, cross cultural projects hold the potential to move beyond the low demand relationships so often encouraged in our globalizing world. Successful cross cultural projects require participants to engage with their collaborators, their participants, and a broad range of research in the pursuit of a richer understanding of important aspects of theory and practice. For adult educators, such work offers the opportunity to more thoroughly imbed our expertise in other disciplines and enrich our own studies with insights from other fields and contexts.

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