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‘REFORMASI’
AND THE CHANGING MEDIASCAPE:
IMPLICATIONS
OF MEDIA LIBERALISATION

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REFORMASI AND THE CHANGING MEDIASCAPe: IMPLICATIONS OF MEDIA LIBERALISATION

By M. Alwi Dahlan

The Asian mediascape is undergoing rapid change in the last few years. There is a new climate for openness, transparency and freedom throughout the region, although at different paces from one country to another. The push toward liberalization is particularly strong in countries where national priorities have been geared at all cost toward rapid economic development together with the maintenance of political stability. Among these countries, the change appears nowhere to be as swift as in Indonesia, generating far reaching consequences and implications.

Within a few days after the culmination of reformasi – when the reform movement succeeded in pressuring President Soeharto to resign – the new government announces a policy of press freedom to end a long history of control and restrictions. Press publishing licenses, which has been restricted to a limited number, are made openly available to any applicant, including to those whose publications have been banned and their permits revoked. To be approved, an application no longer requires a recommendation from the Indonesian Journalist Association (PWI) which accredits its editors and attests on the viability of publication. With the opening of the gate, the total number of licensed publications – at least on paper – doubled in six months, redoubled again in the second six months and continue to increase further, resulting in a flood of new publications. With the loss of its accreditation role, PWI

1Outline of presentation, prepared for Conference on Rethinking Communication and Media Research in Asia, SCS-NTU Singapore. Organized by the Asian Media Information and Communication Center (AMIC), The School of Communication Studies at Nanyang Technological University (NCS-NTU) and the School of Oriental and Asian Studies at the University of London. Singapore, 11-12 June 1999. [This draft will be rewritten and elaborated further for publication after the conference; comments from conference participants for the improvement of this paper are highly appreciated.]

2The Indonesian press have been under some sort of strict control (e.g., through prepublication censorship; publication or printing licenses, newsprint quotas, subsidies, criminal law) throughout its history since the colonial times. However, there were some exceptions. The press was very free in the 1950s prior to President Soekarno's 'guided democracy' era, and in the early years of the New Order government under President Soeharto. Despite war conditions, the press in various regions were also quite free during independence revolution.

3A total of 581 new licenses are issued from May to December 1998, more than twice (201%) as many as all licenses issued in the last 15 years (289 licenses since 1984). After one year of deregulation
position as the sole officially recognized organization is also affected; journalists are free to form and join new organizations. In three months period, 23 such associations are established; at the end of the first year, the total increases to 40.

Deregulation and change also take place in other sectors of mass communication. Similar to the print sector, the broadcast industry are reopened to new investors. According to news reports, seven applications for new television stations have been processed – two of which are said to have been approved and issued licenses. Likewise, several dozens applications for permission to build new radio stations in many regions across the country have been submitted. The opening for new broadcasters, however, has not been followed up in reality. There is no big rush to build new television and radio stations; broadcasting licenses issued by the Department of Information does not guarantee the availability or allocation of frequency – which is under the auspices of the telecommunication authority.

Liberalization of content

Unlike the case of the print media, liberalization of the broadcast media can not be achieved by quantitative means of adding more stations. Radio frequency is a limited natural resource and a public domain; technical limitations imposed by nature can not be solved with political solution.

More effective for broadcasting liberalization is a policy – or the lack thereof – for deregulating information content. The climate of freedom created by reformasi opens the opportunity for private commercial radio and television stations to produce, program and broadcast their own newscasts more freely. Private stations are no longer required to relay every news broadcast beamed by the government’s Televisi Republik Indonesia (TVRI) and Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI) at predetermined time slots.

The neglect in enforcing regulations provide wider opportunities to the broadcasting media. Although by law they are not supposed to air straight news and should limit themselves to ‘features’, the climate of policy relaxation make it possible for private newscasters to take the liberty to create innovative programs without fear to be penalized. Private television broadcasters introduce new formats which have never been used by TVRI, for examples: 30-seconds news headliners between commercial spots, on-the-hour news reports, breaking news, interactive talk shows with life phone-in questions or criticism from the audience at home. In the meantime, radio broadcasters optimize their flexibility and technology for instant coverage of dynamic situations, such as a moving demonstration, riots in progress, life panel discussions or interviews with moving sources sometimes interposed by audience participation (e.g., through cell phones when the news source is on the way to work).

(end of May 1999) the total number of new licenses reaches 922, making a grand total of 1211 publishing licenses.

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In the beginning the broadcasters start with safe or amiable subject matters but, as they feel more confident, they gradually shift to even more sensitive topics, e.g., political corruption, nepotism, ethnic conflicts, accusation directed at prominent persons. The content of ‘breaking news’ changes from verbal reports and still photos to direct broadcast of life coverage of even more dramatic events, such as riots and physical conflicts. The language also becomes more direct, harsher, and straightforward, replacing the refined, oblique language of tradition or the Javanese style of discourse.

The qualitative change in content and style can be observed in the print media as well. Mass media deals with information and symbols; hence liberalization of the media can be meaningful only if reflected in the content and quality of information – not in the quantity. Compared to pre-reformasi newspapers, for instance, the current style is more straightforward, direct, short, brusque or even brutal, full of dramatization, without paying too much attention to social niceties – no theme, topic, object or person is considered taboo to report.

This trend in print journalism is not unlike that in television. In fact, there is the impression, that the older media (print) imitate the younger (broadcasting). When the dynamics of reformasi stimulate fast moving development of events, the broadcasting media was there, ready to serve the audience with instant information. The print media can not cope with the new environment or compete against radio and television – their deadline is much behind the broadcasting time. Consequently, the best they can do is to do what they do best, namely, to provide depth and a more comprehensive picture on the events which are already covered by broadcasting. In other words, broadcasting has set the agenda, focus society’s attention, and define the situation; newspapers and magazines follow later.

The problem is that by its very nature, broadcasting is primarily an entertainment – not a news – media. Many writers have discussed broadcasting tendency toward the superficial (soundbites, infotainment, etc.), but sufficed it is to say here that it poses a dilemma for the print media. The audience expect print media to follow up on the lead pro- vided by broadcasting, even if it turns out to be dramatization or oversimplification of the real event. Readers would like to know in the morning the complete version of the story they heard last night from television; and they will get it from competing newspapers.

This trend brings forth questions concerning professional conduct, ethical standards and legal consequences. The pressure of change and competition tempt all media, broadcasting as well as print, to practice questionable techniques. Unsubstantiated allegations, manipulation of information, misrepresentation of facts, misinterpretations, violation of ground rules, invasion of privacy – practically all ethical infringements could be found regularly in the Indonesian media of today. A number of ‘big’ stories which have received special coverage for days in most of the
media, are never explained and just forgotten when they turned out to be inaccurate or overly dramatized. Moreover, the violations are often praised, and criticisms against them are lightly dismissed, on the name of press freedom and reformasi.

The lack of appreciation for ethics and social responsibility is best illustrated by the popular tabloid Gugat (Accusation) in the slogan regularly printed on its masthead, i.e., ‘Trial by the press’. The same attitude is expressed by many other newspapers, particularly the tabloids, which consider themselves as the most popular media for the audience.4

The global factor

It has been said, that the main factor responsible for media liberalization in Indonesia is the reform policy. This may be true to some extent, but liberalization of policy alone can not explain the speed of change in the mass media sector. The opening in media policy is quantitative in its character, while the really important change in the media occurs in the content aspect of the media. Neither can it explain the speed of acceptance to reformasi by the society at large.

Actually, another factor has been playing an important role in changing the mediascape, i.e., the trend toward ‘globalization’ which begins in the communication sector. Globalization of broadcasting, supported by the networking of national and international television, have been bringing in new ideas and global values since the last decade. There is no local television, no matter how remote, which does not have any foreign content in its programs; it may be even be true, that the more regional and small a station, the more global content it carries. After several years of exposure to such content matter, the common people are getting used to watching demonstrations, acts of violence, or conflicts in other parts of world.

Aside from communication, globalization in other sectors – politics, trade and finance, etc. – have also make an important contribution in the preparation before the big change. Some contributions may be judged negatively, e.g., the global movement of money and trade which contribute to economic crises – which in its turn speed up the coming of political crisis and the pressure toward reformasi.

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4 It is interesting to note, that the applications for the tabloid license is the largest among all types of print media. From all of the 581 publishing licenses issued up to 31 December 1999, more than half (305 licenses) are for tabloids.