First Monday, Volume 1, Number 3 - 2 September 1996

By ANDREAS HARSONO

Abstract

Open and accessible to a global audience, the Internet represents a vehicle by which information can be disseminated quickly in comparison to newspapers and magazines. The open and democratic nature of the Internet can sometimes be at odds with policies and practices of certain governments and officials. In this article, the impact of the Internet in Indonesia is discussed, relative to a history of governmental control of the traditional media.

Contents

Media Closure
Go Internet
Communism on the Net
Appendix 1

Jakarta, July 15 - When the Indonesian Armed Forces invited around 40 newspaper editors and television executives to have a luncheon in a military building in Jakarta last June, military spokesman Brig. Gen. Amir Syarifudin asked the editors “not to exaggerate” their coverage on opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri.

Gen. Syarifudin jokingly asked the editors not to use the words “to unseat” and “to topple” in their reporting, suggesting the editors to use the name Megawati Kiemas when referring to the chairwoman of the opposition Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) - after the surname of her husband - rather than the name she is commonly known by - Megawati Sukarnoputri - after her father, the charismatic and revolutionary President Sukarno, whom President Suharto, the current leader, replaced after an abortive coup d’état in 1965.

The general also asked the editors “to defend the dignity of the government,” denying earlier media reports that the military is behind the congress held in the city of Medan, in northern Sumatra, to replace Megawati with a government-appointed leader.

It is a custom on the island of Java, the most populated areas of Indonesia, to call someone by his or her first name. “It made no difference to call me after my husband or my father. After all people know that there is only one Megawati,” the leader once said.

The following day almost all of the Indonesian media drastically toned down their coverage on the ongoing street rallies in which thousands pro-democracy activists went to the streets, clashed with riot police and blasted the military intervention on the eve of the congress.

It was quite easy for the military-led regime - whose leader President Suharto rose to power since 1965 after an aborted coup attempt blamed on the communists - to prevent news organizations to cover the protests.

The conventional censorship, however, stopped just there. The public still get the news thanks to the Internet and international radios. Protesters gathering at the PDI headquarters in Central Jakarta distributed print outs of the "Indonesia-L" mailing list gopher://gopher.igc.apc.org:2998/7REG-INDONESIA. They also faxed the news reports to their provincial offices and plastered the uncensored reports on the wall.

Internet-based reports with titles such as "Officers Accompany PDI Representatives in Congress," "Army Engineer Congress," "Journalists Are Beaten and Bribed," "Army Sets Up Check Points Around Medan," and "Suharto Himself Appoint Soerjadi" are widely distributed in Jakarta.

Even after the military forcibly took over the PDI headquarters on July 27, the Internet played a more crucial role to penetrate the information blockade in Indonesia. It has been very important to build public opinion; the military has taken a number of measures to deal with it.

A lecturer at Duta Wacana Christian University in Yogyakarta, around 500 kilometers east of Jakarta, has been arrested at his home by soldiers. He was accused of distributing electronic mail messages relating to the 27 July 1996 riots (see Appendix 1).
Media Closure

It is widely believed here that the powerful Armed Forces toppled the democratically-elected Megawati following a proposal that she run for President in the 1998 presidential elections. The prospect of a challenger to Suharto, himself a former Armed Forces commander, would be unprecedented. He has been elected President on six successive occasions, but no one has ever challenged his nomination and re-election.

Although Suharto is known because of his success to transform Indonesia, once the pariah of the world, into one of the leading economies in the Pacific, along with other countries like Malaysia and Thailand, but critics said he ruled Indonesia with a strong hand. No opposition is allowed. Disagreement usually ended up in violent crackdowns that have occurred in East Timor, Irian Jaya, Aceh, and other disputed areas.

The Christian-nationalist PDI is the smallest but the most outspoken of the three existing political parties in Indonesia, itself a vast, dynamic and complicated country. Indonesia has the fourth largest population in the world and the largest Moslem population in the world. Most of PDI supporters are located in the central and eastern part of Java and the scenic island of Bali as well as on the eastern part of Indonesia where most of the Christians live.

The military-backed government has in the past closed down dozens of newspapers. It closed down three news weeklies in June 1994 and later jailed four journalists working for underground media who protested the closure.

In a response to allegations of biased reporting, Megawati's supporters burned a number of newspapers and staged a protest in front of the RCTI http://www.indosoft.co.id/ television, the largest private station in Indonesia. It is owned by the son of President Suharto. Protesters pointed out that the station had not reported a single image of their rallies while boosting the military-sponsored congress.

The military has also banned local stations from helping foreign news agencies - such as Reuters http://www.reuters.com, Associated Press Television, Worldwide Television News (WTN), Cable News Network http://www.cnn.com, Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Channel 9 of Australia - feed their pictures abroad. An official of the state-owned TVRI said any pictures of the street demonstration were not to be up-linked with its equipment. The military also banned all electronic media in Indonesia from broadcasting the rallies.

Peter Gontha, the head of RCTI, defended himself and said that his most important calculation is business. He remarked that "Rather than making the government to close down the station, it is much better for me to toe the line." When asked about the RCTI's biased coverage on the PDI issue, Gontha said, "It's better for me not to talk about the PDI."

Nevertheless censorship, intimidation, harassment, and media closure are not new in Indonesia. These measures date back to at least 1745 when the Dutch colonial ruler closed down the "Batavische Nouvelles" tabloid. Hundreds, if not thousands, newspapers have been closed down by the Dutch and the Japanese colonial rulers as well as the administrations of President Sukarno (1945-1965) and President Suharto.

According to Goenawan Mohamad, the former editor-in-chief of the banned TEMPO http://www.idola.net/tempo news weekly, "self-censorship has became a ritual" in Indonesia where reporters, before typing a single word, have to question themselves whether their reports could pass their editorial self-censorship and be printed.

Journalists have realized that their first duty is to respect the truth, to defend the principles of freedom in honest collection and publication of news, and to honor the right of fair comment and criticism. Many journalists, and perhaps their editors as well, know that they lied when reporting the PDI issue.

Go Internet

The "Indonesia-L" mailing list, which is popularly known here as "apakabar" after its mailing address apakabar@clark.net, is moderated by American John MacDougall. It serves its subscribers with daily news reports from both Indonesian and foreign newspapers, underground news agencies as well as individuals willing to provide commentary.

The arrival of the superhighway communication has opened a new field for Indonesian journalists advocating free speech. Many believed, including the internationally-recognized Goenawan, also an Internet user, that the new media would help penetrate information blockade imposed by the military government.

"They could ask Internet providers to censor Web sites but not e-mails," Goenawan said, adding that the military will apparently choose to counter critical information with overflowing supplies of pro-government information.


Underground reports were mostly written in Bahasa Indonesia. One is a news agency called "PIPA" gopher://gopher.igc.apc.org:2998/?REG-INDONESIA?PIPA - which literally means "pipe." It was established by professional journalists who cannot print their reports in the mainstream media. Their reports are professionally written, balanced, quoting both the activists and the army officers. They are based on facts, hard news-oriented with datelines, and frequently used by Jakarta-based foreign journalists to write additional reports. These reports are always anonymous
and the moderator, of course, does not provide identities.

It was perhaps a coincidence. But the list and its unlicensed news agencies became extremely popular since the government closed down news weeklies TEMPO, DeTIK, and Editor in June 1994. Media observers believed that the closure reflected the growing uneasiness among officials on free speech and prompted press freedom fighters to exploit the Internet.

Thousands then staged street protests, including younger journalists, demanding the government to revoke the controversial decisions. The military-led regime gave no response but clashed the protesters with rattans and troops.

Worse than that, the protesting journalists who later set up an independent union, were sacked from their respective offices. The government-controlled Indonesian Journalists Association (PWI) put pressures on editors to dismiss the journalists, arguing that the Indonesian law only recognizes one, single and compulsory journalist organization. "Those who are out of the organization are not allowed to work as journalists," said PWI Secretary General Parni Hadi, who is also the chief editor of Republika http://www.republika.co.id daily.

The government closed down the three weeklies following their coverage over disagreements among government officials on the procurement of an ex-East Germany warship at the cost of $US1.1 billion. President Suharto alleged that the media had pit officials against each other.

Unemployed journalists in response set up underground newspapers and went to the Internet. One of the most influential was an unlicensed magazine called the "Suara Independen" gopher://gopher.igc.apc.org:2998/7REG-INDONESIA?independen which also appeared on the "Indonesia-L" mailing list.

This magazine reported that Information Minister Harmoko had accumulated shares in more than 30 news organizations in Indonesia allegedly by blackmailing publishers. It also covered the deteriorating health of the 75-year-old President Suharto, creating widespread speculation among the ruling elite in Jakarta about his successor.

Under Indonesian law, a publisher must apply for a publishing license from the Information Ministry and receive a dozen other recommendations from various agencies before publishing a newspaper. Many believed that the regulation is designed to circumscribe freedom of expression in the country where the Ministry could revoke the licenses on editorial grounds.

Earlier in 1994, Indonesia's first Internet commercial provider, Indonet, began operation. A number of others soon followed and Indonesia now has more than 20 independent service providers. No official statement has been released on the number of Internet subscribers. But Internet operators in Jakarta estimate that Indonesia now has around 30,000 e-mail users, a relatively low number compared to its population of 195 million.

Human Rights Watch/Asia gopher://gopher.humanrights.org:5000 said in May 1996 that the Internet is more free than any other mass medium in Indonesia thanks to an absence of laws, regulations, or ministerial decrees concerning its use.

Even surprisingly, the banned TEMPO magazine reappeared on the Internet on March 6, 1996 and established a Web site called "TEMPO Interaktif" without immediate government objection. Information Minister Harmoko, who closed down the weekly, said he did not see anything wrong with its home page. He said, "Anybody can go on the Internet. There are no regulations against it."

The inaugural edition of the magazine picked up the most controversial issue of the week: the government's decision to give special privileges to a car-making company run by Hutomo Mandala Putra, President Suharto's youngest son.

Four months later, it has more than 5,000 registered subscribers and the server is hit by around 10,000 net surfers each day. "Perhaps, this home page is the most hit Web site on Indonesia established in Indonesia," said one of its editors.

**Communism on the Net**

The Indonesian military probably does not like the idea of a mailing list like "Indonesia-L" gopher://gopher.igc.apc.org:2998/7REG-INDONESIA available on the Internet. In a move to renew its anti-communist crusade, a senior general said a number of prominent figures, including an Indonesian scholar living in exile in Australia, use a "communist method" to propagate leftist views through the Internet.

President Suharto himself warned in October 1995 that certain "formless organizations" had been propagating communist teachings in the guise of concern for human rights and democracy, preying on young people to topple the government, split the Armed Forces and set the Armed Forces against the people, and destroy the nation.

"Many people do not believe the communist resurrection. OK! But in 1926, it was the communists who started the first rebellion. Then in 1948, who else? The Indonesian Communist Party were crushed down. But in 1965 they revived again and conducted a rebellion," said Lt. Gen. Soeyono, the chief of staff on general affairs of the Armed Forces.

He also said that the allegedly communist scholars used the Internet to propagate their teachings, adding that he read papers written by Dr. George Junus Aditjondro gopher://gopher.igc.apc.org:2998/7REG-INDONESIA?Aditjondro on the internationally-disputed East Timor http://www.uc.pt/Timor/TimorNet.html which is claimed by Indonesia despite
resistance in the area since 1975. It is a taboo in Indonesia to question the legitimacy of East Timor as a province to Indonesia.

Soeyono said the Indonesian communists usually spend a one-generation period to revive their organizations. Despite the collapse of several communist countries, many former communist cadres worldwide are now supposedly forming so-called international non-governmental organizations dedicated to human rights, labor issues, and democratization.

Lt. Gen. Soeyono named some, including Dr. Aditjondro, award-winning novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer and unionist Muchtar Pakpahan, but he was criticized for reviving a groundless crusade against communists, in the manner of the late U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy, as justification to suppress dissent.

Under Indonesian law, a former communist and his or her relatives are not allowed to work in the fields of education, military, bureaucracy, and other disciplines. It has been estimated that around half a million communists were killed in the aftermath of the 1965 failed coup attempt.

When visiting an office of a magazine, military spokesman Syarifudin himself threatened to take action against journalists if his words on the Megawati issue were to appear on the Internet. "It's time to draw a line between friends and enemies," he said.

Internet providers also have difficulties because of the frequent visits by military officers, searching for the names of certain users. According to Feraldi W. Loeis of the Internet provider Radnet, which counts more than 3,000 users, they have so far rejected these requests on the privacy grounds. "We've haven't been asked to censor anyone." Radnet has been asked to curb the distribution of what has been called vulgar pornographic material but has not been asked to censor politics.

Asked what he will do if the military threatened to close down his business, Loeis simply said he would prefer to quit and do other kinds of business as long as his reputation was safe. "My name is more important than bowing to pressures like that," Loeis noted.

The military has suggested to the Information Ministry the need for some sort of "gate" to "blackout" news that could damage Indonesian culture or affect security. It has also suggested registering uses and users. An inter-departmental team has been set up to study the Internet.

Gen. Syarifudin himself is now busy trying to locate journalists who continue to write uncensored news reports. The army has reportedly assigned some of its intelligence force to search office by office, editor by editor, to find Internet-based journalists who reported to the outside world that the ruling military officers in Indonesia have not been entirely open and candid in their dealings.

---

About the Author

Andreas Harsono is a freelance journalist based in Jakarta. He works for the Bangkok-based Nation newspaper and he is also on the board of the Institute for the Studies on Free Flow of Information. Harsono is a founding member of the Alliance of Independent Journalist in Jakarta.

Appendix 1: Human Rights Watch: Indonesia

from Human Rights Watch
New York, N.Y.
8/15/96
letter
free

INDONESIA ASKED TO FREE INTERNET USER

Human Rights Watch

(Editor's Note: Human Rights Watch sent the following letter, protesting the arrest of a university lecturer for communicating on the Internet, to the Indonesian government today.)

August 14, 1996

His Excellency M. Arifin Siregar
Ambassador to the United States
Your Excellency:

I am writing on behalf of Human Rights Watch/Asia to protest the arrest of Drs. Prihadi Beny Waluyo, a lecturer at Duta Wacana Christian University. Drs. Waluyo was arrested at his home by soldiers of the district military command. He was reportedly accused of distributing e-mail messages and also of sending messages relating to the July 27 riots to a destination in Holland. His arrest came after an unidentified person gave an officer photocopies of e-mail messages that were traced to Drs. Waluyo. The person claimed the printouts came from a store in Kebumen, a district of Yogyakarta.

Following his arrest, Drs. Waluyo was interrogated by the military about his connections with the Peoples Democratic Party (PRD), which the government has accused of masterminding the riots, but he denied any involvement with the PRD. He acknowledged that he had sent messages over the Internet. Following his questioning, he was reportedly ordered to go to his home and was told to report to the district military command on a regular basis. He is said to be under strict surveillance.

Human Rights Watch opposes actions by the Indonesian government to restrict electronic communication. As stated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression: this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

We believe that such forums provide a truly unique opportunity for people from around the globe to share their views with an international audience. By allowing unrestricted communication, important issues can receive the benefit of serious discussion by the broadest cross-section of society. If the Internet is to achieve its potential to become a global information infrastructure, it is important, at the present moment, to agree to allow its unrestricted development.

We urge that Drs. Waluyo and every other citizen be allowed to receive and transmit electronic mail without fear of harassment, intimidation, or arrest.

Sincerely,

Sidney Jones
Executive Director
Human Rights Watch/Asia

cc: His Excellency Nugroho Wisnumurti, Ambassador to the United Nations

Copyright © 1996, First Monday

Indonesia: From Mainstream to Alternative Media by Andreas Harsono.
First Monday, volume 1, number 3 (September 1996),
URL: http://www.firstmonday.org/?journal=fm&page=article&op=view&path[]=480