Building Australia's Relationship with Indonesia

Australia-Indonesia Media Relations

A submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

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Abstract

The Australian media has often been considered a contributor to conflict in our country's relationship with Indonesia. Despite strong tensions surrounding the activities of Australian journalists in the past, especially the 1980s, there are new opportunities in the post-Soeharto era for the media to contribute towards healthy relations of understanding between Australia and Indonesia. Differences over issues such as East Timor and people smugglers have been impediments to bilateral relations, but there is a stronger collaborative spirit in the wake of the October 12 Bali bombing. The increased emphasis on security after the bombing means that journalists and others involved in information provision can play an important role in reinforcing the current climate of cooperation. It will be important to ensure that Australian government-funded services like Radio Australia and ABC Asia Pacific provide carefully targeted programs that suit Indonesian target audiences. Study of Australia and Indonesia's news media indicate that, in general, both countries' journalists show clear limitations in their reporting of the other country. Greater emphasis on providing means for Indonesian journalists to access Australian sources and vice versa would also help to overcome many of the current limitations in the flows of news information between the two countries. Most programs involving Australian journalists visiting Indonesia have been temporarily halted due to current DFAT advice that Australians delay all non-essential travel. Such cross-country visits have significant outcomes and, in the longer term, should be increased or at least maintained at present levels. Efforts should be made to ensure that exchanges involve Indonesian journalists from news organisations whose audiences include the military and political parties.

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Australia-Indonesia Media Relations

The activities of Australian journalists have on many occasions been considered a contributing factor to disruptions and difficulties in relations between Australia and Indonesia. One of the best-known examples is the uneasy relations between Australia and Indonesia that followed the publication of David Jenkins' 1986 'Soeharto billions' story on the *Sydney Morning Herald*'s front page. A range of Australian governmental institutions have poured money and effort into improving the nature of the media relationship. Journalism practitioners, educators and academics have also spent much time in researching the problem, writing about it and designing training/educational programs to improve the quality of Australia's reporting about Indonesia and to a lesser degree, Indonesia's reporting of Australia. Unfortunately, much of the debate focuses on what Australian journalists should or should not have said, rather than issues of 'relationships'. This submission is aimed at dissecting several key elements of the relationship and their political context.

It is fitting that the Joint Standing Committee's inquiry into Australia and Indonesia's relationship comes at this time, when the tragedy of the Bali bombing leaves open new possibilities for developing the relationship. With heightened emphasis on information accompanying an increased focus on security in both countries, the media could conceivably play an important role in this.

Australian Coverage of Indonesia

In a 1997 article on 'Australia-Indonesia Media Relations' in *Media & Culture Review*, I identified several factors that led to weaknesses in Australian reporting of Indonesia. My research found that inaccurate or incomplete reporting arose because of:

- The requirement of Australian correspondents to "hit the ground running" on arrival in Indonesia, starting to file stories from the moment they arrive, without time for settling in and orientation.
- The lack of support in most newsrooms for time, training or study programs in Indonesian language, history and culture. Most journalists who undertake language or other study do so in their own time, at their own initiative and at their own expense. Some journalists

even encounter difficulties in attaining sufficient time off work to attend programs that come at no expense to their news organisation, such as the Australia-Indonesia Institute's cultural exchange programs for journalists.

- Australian journalists' unfamiliarity with the Indonesian source culture. Many sources in Indonesian business, politics and bureaucracy may take weeks or months to respond to calls from journalists, if they respond at all, in contrast to their Australian counterparts who might reply in minutes or hours. Combined with the pressures of tight Australian newsroom deadlines, this meant that journalists were more likely to file stories that were incomplete than they might at home.
- Reliance on other correspondents and easily accessible range of western or westernised news sources for information and analysis. This limits the range of issues and views being reported.

Such problems persist since I wrote the article in 1997. However, with the increase in business and cultural links between Australia and Indonesia in the 1990s, journalists are covering a broader range of issues – at least in the 'quality' press – in recognition of the greater economic and social interest that Australians have in the country.

It should also be remembered that throughout the 1990s and early 21st century, there have been less than a dozen Australian journalists on fixed postings (ie one year or longer) in Indonesia at any one time. With such a small pool of Australian journalists based in-country, the positive or negative actions of any one can have a disproportionate impact on the overall image of Australian journalism and the quality/range of information coming into Australia about Indonesia.

Indonesian Responses to Australian Journalism

Indonesian criticism of Australian journalists built in intensity from the time of Indonesia's occupation in East Timor in 1975 to hit a peak into the 1980s. David Jenkins joked in the mid-1980s that so many foreign journalists were summoned to Indonesia's Department of Information to be cautioned or rebuked at the time that they almost wore a groove in the office stairway. For a total of six years in that decade, all Australian applications for foreign correspondents' visas were rejected. When Australian journalists were permitted back into the

country after 1991, they were acutely aware of this and of the range of issues that were likely to disturb the sensibilities of Indonesian officials and what kinds of stories were most likely to have their stories revoked. In a series of interviews with Jakarta-based Australian correspondents in the mid-1990s, I found that the correspondents used far less of the brash, forthright language than Australian journalists generally do in covering domestic news. They consciously and scrupulously avoided blunt, confrontational words and phrases when writing about sensitive topics. Critical stories also tended to focus more on issues, rather than the individuals behind them. Correspondents attempted to avoid any appearance of direct attack or criticism of prominent figures, most especially the then president, Soeharto, his family and his associates.

Indonesian government reprimands of Australian and other Western correspondents strongly corresponded with times of domestic political tension. However, the Indonesian Government is believed to have castigated Australian journalists more than correspondents as a symbol of its rejection of Western criticism in general. Indonesia's Foreign Minister claimed in the 1980s that critical stories published in Australia were more likely to cause offence than equivalent stories printed in the US, because Australia was closer. Geographic proximity means that Australia reports far more news about Indonesia than the US or Europe do; overall, complaints that Indonesia makes about Australia's reporting echo those of South American countries about reportage from the US, or that African nations make about reportage from the UK and Europe. More coverage means more critical stories that may offend Indonesian officials. Even more to the point, Australia's aid, trade and investment contribution to Indonesia was minuscule in the 1980s compared to that of the US. It was economically pragmatic for Indonesian officials to express indignation with Australian journalists rather than their American counterparts. With improvements in Australian-Indonesian trade and social relations in the 1990s, there was a corresponding improvement in attitudes towards Australian journalists.

The strains which have arisen around the activities of Australian correspondents in Indonesia have often resulted from differences between Australia and Indonesia in understandings about the roles of journalists and governments in general. Australian journalists are generally socialised to believe that ideally (i) the government/bureaucracy should be open to public scrutiny, (ii) journalists have 'watchdog' role in critiquing and correcting government/bureaucracy, thus acting as the so-called Fourth Estate of government, and (iii)

that government/bureaucracy should be responsive to public opinion, as expressed through the media and other channels. By contrast, during the Soeharto era, Indonesian journalists were told that a watchdog function was inappropriate. Journalists were encouraged to support government policy for the sake of national development and to show respect for the self-styled 'Father of Development', Soeharto, and his bureaucrats. Lectures and addresses were delivered to Australian journalists to 'explain' that Indonesian 'culture' was different, and that Australian-style trenchant criticism was not acceptable of father-like political leaders, who were more accustomed to deference. Australian journalists were encouraged to respect these cultures by moderating their expression, taking care in reporting sensitive topics and showing appropriate respect.

My ethnographic and survey research in Indonesian newsrooms indicates that are several key problems with this line of argument.

- Relatively few of the Indonesians who believe Australian reportage about Indonesia has been objectionable ever read Australian newspapers or media reports. Critics are often told – second- or third-hand – that offensive things had been said about "Indonesia".
- Australian journalists' criticism of a particular individual, policy or action is often conflated as being a criticism of the whole nation. This problems is exacerbated because, (i) as discussed above, most Indonesians probably did not read/hear the original report, and (ii) Australian journalists sometimes refer to individual political leaders as if they were countries (eg saying "Jakarta says..." or "Indonesia has decided to...", when in fact an individual minister, military figure or the president is responsible for the words or actions).
- Australian cultures are dismissed as unimportant. During the Soeharto era, Australian journalists may have been comparatively 'rough' in discussing the Indonesian government compared to the way in which Indonesians discussed domestic politics. However, in context, in the past decade, it has been rare to see the Indonesian president discussed in the kinds of terms that newspapers regularly used to discuss John Howard (eg Howard was described with words such as weak, stupid, misguided and ineffectual, while it would be unusual to see such language directed towards Soeharto, his family or his associates). Australian reportage of coverage of Indonesia has not been more insensitive or inaccurate than coverage of other home affairs or of any other countries.
- Indonesian cultures are misrepresented. During the Soeharto era, the definition of

'authentic' Indonesian culture conveniently matched the political rhetoric of the New Order government and protected it from criticism; the government's definition of Indonesian culture was not necessarily an accurate representation of the hundreds of ethnic groups living across the archipelago. In survey I conducted with 65 Indonesian journalists in 1996-1998, 80% expressed extreme dissatisfaction with the way in which the Soeharto government suppressed journalistic freedom under the guise of 'Indonesian culture'. Most felt that the 'culture' of respect for father figures was a 'political culture' imposed by Indonesia's leadership rather than a 'social culture' that sprang naturally from their own communities.

- Respect does not mean censorship. There is much evidence to indicate that until the collapse of the economy in 1997-98, Indonesians generally agreed that Soeharto was entitled to respect, even when he showed signs of fault, because of his contribution to national development. This did not mean that criticism was impossible, but that balance – a view of both positive and negative sides of the case – was needed when criticism was to be made. There have indeed been cases of Australian reporting of Indonesia that have genuinely been insensitive, bellicose, inaccurate, unbalanced or sensationalist. Some Australian journalists have correctly been censured for such faults, but others have been censured despite well-established reputations for balance and sensitivity in their writing.
- Political culture is not static. The sensitivity that the Indonesian government and military showed to Australian media criticism in the 1980s dropped markedly during the 1990s. Foreign correspondents noted that restrictions on their activities decreased and journalists' visas became easier to acquire. The Australian media had notably more freedom to report critically than the local media, with the business press generally having the most freedom of all. From about 1991 onwards, it appeared that key figures within the Soeharto government became reconciled with a view that since few Indonesians read foreign newspapers, it was politically pragmatic to allow the foreign media more freedom to report critically than the local media. It was seen as particularly important that the business community had access to information, thus explaining the freedoms allowed to the business press. With the collapse of the Indonesian economy in late 1997 and early 1998, the local news media subsequently attained the freedoms enjoyed by the foreign media.
- Indonesians were also 'culturally inappropriate'. Questions of whether Australian journalists' reporting style was 'culturally appropriate' neglects the fact that the same

attacks that were directed at critical Australian journalists were also thrown at critical Indonesian journalists. During the Soeharto era, literally hundreds of local journalists saw their media organisations shut down because the government found them too critical for comfort. Individuals who critiqued their government too strongly were often accused of 'wearing foreign glasses' or being influenced by foreign ideologies, a political caveat with the same kind of menace as being dubbed un-American during the McCarthy era.

In summary, the real issue for local and foreign journalists in covering sensitive issues during Soeharto's New Order was usually not one of whether they could write 'culturally appropriate' criticisms, but one of whether the critical issue was sufficiently important that they should risk having their news organisations shut down or their visas revoked.

With crumbling of the New Order system in 1998, and Soeharto's resignation in May that year, the deregulated media environment allowed local, Australian and other foreign journalists greater latitude in their reporting. Since freedom of the press to identify and criticise government faults is seen as an important part of the move to reform, fight corruption and build democracy, Australian journalists have been free to travel through the country and have faced no substantial opposition to their reporting, except in some conflict areas – such as like East Timor, Aceh and Irian Jaya/West Papua. In March 2002, when the Indonesian authorities' refusal to renew the foreign correspondents' visa of Fairfax Newspapers' Lindsay Murdoch, concerns were raised that there would be a renewal of Soeharto-era pressures on foreign correspondents. The visa decision was viewed by many as 'punishment for Murdoch's coverage of alleged human rights abuses by the Indonesian military. Overall, however, the assessment is that outside of the conflict areas mentioned above, successive post-Soeharto governments have been positive in their dealings with the Australian and other foreign media.

In both the pre- and post-Soeharto era, Indonesians in government, journalism and general society appear to generally believe that Australian reportage about Indonesia is predominantly critical. During the Soeharto era, it was commonly assumed that it was objectionably so. Given the inability of the domestic media to express views that deviated very far from official viewpoints, it was often assumed that these apparently objectionable views were the perspectives of the Australian government or the whole Australian people. Even in the post-Soeharto era, staff in government-affiliated news organisations like the Antara wire service,

Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI) and Televisi Republic Indonesia (TVRI) are experiencing difficulty in separating themselves from the culture of supporting government policy. In general, however, Indonesians are now more accustomed to the concept of the media's editorial independence from government. This has weakened (although not eradicated) assumptions that news from Radio Australia, ABC Asia Pacific or even the *Sydney Morning Herald* necessarily reflect Australian government or community views.

Specific mention of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation is worthwhile, since the network has been the subject of particular Indonesian government scrutiny since the 1970s. Radio Australia was significant for three reasons. Firstly, too the Indonesian government, Radio Australia was unlike local media organisations, which until 1999 could be shut down by revoking their licenses to operate, and unlike foreign newspapers, which could be banned from Indonesia. The highly popular Radio Australia could not be stopped without jamming the signal, which would have been costly and ineffective. Secondly, with relatively low distribution of newspapers and magazines across the archipelago, radio has been the most significant post-WWII media of news and entertainment. Thirdly, Radio Australia's services had large Indonesian audiences until the 1990s, when large numbers of commercial radio and television stations were established, providing considerable competition for the scratchy shortwave broadcasts from Australia. Fourthly, there was (and remains) some resistance in government and military circles to the concept that the Australian Government cannot influence the ABC's editorial content, since it was believed that government funding necessarily meant government influence. However, even government officials who have criticised Radio Australia have also recognised the importance of its contribution as an information provider. This is the reason why, despite their criticism of Radio Australia over the years, the Indonesian authorities greeted suggestions in the late 1990s that Radio Australia's services would be scaled back as a sign of Australia's diminishing interest in the country and the region.

With the increasing influence of television in Indonesia and the continuing significance of radio, it becomes important for Australia to ensure that both its international radio and television broadcasts are meaningful to Indonesian audiences, who now have a multiplicity of choices and competitors for their attention. The commencement of ABC Asia Pacific services in December 2001 has primarily been seen as a positive move, although only limited numbers of people (600,000 in a country of more than 200 million) with cable or satellite access in centres like

Jakarta can receive the channel. The ABC's internal research suggests that awareness of the channel is quite strong among elite groups. While ABC Asia Pacific does not have the mass reach that Radio Australia had in its heyday, there could be substantial diplomatic benefit if *well-targeted* programming is offered to the highly educated and influential classes that can access the service. Given that the targeting audience has access to popular international services, ranging from CNN to MTV, programmers need to be sophisticated in their consideration of audience needs.

Indonesian Coverage of Australia

Compared to the space/time dedicated in Australian quality newspapers and the ABC to Indonesia, there is relatively little in the Indonesian quality press about Australia, unless it specifically relates to Indonesian interests. Recent issues that have considerable and obvious resonance include the October 12 Bali bombing, people smuggling, Middle Eastern asylum seekers, East Timor and Australia's relationship with other secessionist territories. Apart from stories like these with a clear 'hometown angle', stories about Australia tend to focus on news of disruption or disaster, international sporting events hosted by Australia, and 'quirky' or cute stories, usually about koalas, kangaroos and crocodiles. Many serious political analyses published in quality news, business and political journals will refer to Australia as 'negara kanguru' (kangaroo country), which reinforces the quirky/cute identification.

The way that the Indonesian media has viewed Australia has fluctuated considerably over the decades. However, it should be understood that sometimes when the Indonesian media printed negative stories about Australia during the Soeharto era, this did not necessarily indicate any media hostility to Australia. Given the risk during the New Order that news organisations might be shut down for printing news that offended senior figures, journalists often engaged in what *Far Eastern Economic Review* reporter Susumu Awanohara called the "guerilla war with security-minded officialdom". In this war, journalists often 'respectfully' presented Indonesian government opinions at the start and finish of a news story. However, they also slipped other versions into the story in less prominent positions, indicating to the story's audience that there were credible alternatives to the government's version of events. Journalists also made much of official denials. By reporting government rejection of certain criticisms, journalists then had leeway to explain the substance of the issues in question. In sum, because

the Indonesian media could not always criticise the military or political leaders and policies directly, they would sometimes allow critics – such as sources from Australia – to raise issues that journalists themselves wanted aired. The critical sources, however, were left to take any blame for official displeasure with the fact that issues or views had been presented. In fact, the more that Australia or the critical source was censured, the more this allowed the journalists to cover the story. This style of reporting has all but died out in the post-Soeharto era, but it indicates the importance of understanding the context of reports and not interpreting all criticism literally.

Some staff at Indonesia's state-run or state-affiliated news organisations have attempted to use their reporting to build positive relations with Australia. There have been cases in which TVRI, RRI and Antara have consciously chosen to downplay news they think might be offensive to the Australian government and to play up positive news about such issues. However, in considering what might offend 'Australia', these journalists are actually considering what might offend the 'Australian government'. Overall this kind of journalism is limited, even within politically conservative state organisations like TVRI, RRI and Antara. These three organisations have each also notably run biased, sensationalist or simply inaccurate stories about Australia in recent years (most notably in relation toAustralia's involvement in East Timor, but also with regards to other issues). However, the fact that some journalists still engage in this kind of 'positive' journalism reflects the longevity of Soeharto-era philosophies about the importance of the media muting criticism for the sake of development and social harmony.

Indonesia has extremely few journalists based in Australia, and the sources that Indonesian journalists use for Australian stories tend to be highly limited. A limited range of official Australian sources make the news, but even large news organisations lack the contact networks to cover complex issues in any depth. Apart from replicating wire reports, Indonesian journalists rely heavily on reporting Indonesian government or military sources' opinions about reported developments in Australia.

Australian Responses to Indonesian Journalism

Indonesia's sensitivity to Australian criticism reflects the fact that as a relatively new, post-

colonial, developing nation, it is acutely conscious of the potential for external interference in domestic affairs. Australian journalists, politicians and academics pay far less attention to the nature of Indonesia's reportage of Australia than Indonesians do to the Australian coverage of Indonesia. Focus groups that I conducted this year on the subject of Australia-Indonesia-East Timor relations found that in comparison to Indonesians' high public awareness about perceived Australian criticisms of Indonesia, the broader Australian public has relatively little idea of how we might be represented by the Indonesians. Australian officials have at times conducted briefings and similar activities to respond to perceived inaccuracies, bias, sensationalism or other faults in the Indonesian media, but overall, Australia's reaction is low key.

Australian government, military and business organisations could have been far more proactive than they have been to date in disseminating Australian perspectives, especially when 'crises' arise around issues like East Timor, refugees and so on. Greater recognition is needed of how few Indonesians know Australian sources that they can contact on such issues, so that attempts can be made to redress the imbalances that result. This is especially important given that some sources in the Indonesian military and government have vested interests in identifying an easy 'opposition' against which they can rally support; Australia forms an easy target for those seeking cheap political points by attacking 'outsiders' who would 'meddle' in domestic affairs. The resources that the Australian Government commits to providing Australian angles and perspectives on bilateral issues are extremely limited given the overall benefits of developing a positive relationship with Indonesia.

Small efforts to build Australia's image in the media have great effect. To this day, an impressively large number and range of Indonesians in government, the media, the professions and the middle classes remember Paul Keating as being 'pro-Indonesia'. In examining the respective policies of the Keating and Howard governments towards Indonesia, the positive glow that surrounds Keating clearly results not so much because of specific policy initiatives but because of his government's consistent and strong efforts to 'talk up' its commitment to and value for Indonesia and to ensure that such talk gained an audience. It is not sufficient to be dedicated towards building bilateral relationships; Australia must be *seen* to be dedicated towards that relationship, and the media is a key mechanism for this.

Times of Crisis: The Economy, East Timor, and the Bali Bombing

At the time of Soeharto's resignation in May 1998, the forecast for Australia-Indonesia media relationship should have been good. Indonesia was embracing the forthright, critical media style that was second-nature to Australian journalists. News of Australia's support for Indonesia's efforts to attain IMF loans had been front-page news. Australia was providing considerable training and aid to help democratise the political system and ameliorate the economic crisis. Although such efforts were not always heavily publicised, the image of Australia overall was positive.

The negative shadows that existed primarily related to suspicions about Australia's role in fomenting secessionist movements in East Timor. Indonesians in general felt some 'loss of face' because of the negative news that persistently came from East Timor. Additionally, even though there was heavy infighting between the Indonesian military's many factions, all factions agreed that maintaining a grip on East Timor was important to national integrity.

The image of Australia was that it was primarily pro-independence. Very few Indonesians expressed cognisance of the fact that the official standpoint of the Australian government on East Timor was very different to that of vocal pro-independence groups based in Australia, which differed again to that of the broader Australian populace. Nor was there any particular understanding that a desire to improve the lives of the East Timorese was not intrinsically connected with a hatred of Indonesians (although it is true to say that most pro-independence groups had considerable suspicion of the Indonesian *military*). Indonesian journalists were not any more enlightened, and would intermittently ask Indonesian-speaking colleagues such as myself questions such as "Is the death of those journalists in 1975 the reason why Australians hate Indonesia so much?" Most of the Indonesian media indirectly "blamed" Australia for President B.J. Habibie's decision to conduct the 1999 referendum in East Timor for independence or autonomy.

There has been considerable academic analysis of both Australian and Indonesian coverage of the referendum and its aftermath. The analysis has found that both sides tended to point to the other's faults and brutality. Many Indonesian news organisations also revived old clichés about Australia wishing to pry in Indonesia's affairs and about Australia being anti-Islamic in

its motives for supporting the predominantly Catholic East Timorese. Such arguments were enhanced by the substantial inaccuracies in Australian reporting the post-referendum atrocities and the death toll.

Both Australian and Indonesian journalists relied heavily on sources from their own 'side'; while this is natural, both countries' efforts at image control would have been assisted by greater work in building connections with the pools of journalists most intensely involved in covering the issues. Greater gestures by Australia to indicate sensitivity towards Indonesia's 'loss of face' in the resounding Timorese decision for independence in favour of autonomy would also have assisted, especially given Indonesia's propensity to displace anxieties about Timor onto Australia. Underlying antagonism towards Australia simmered in many Indonesian media organisations and was evident for at least a year in many stories, including those not directly relating to East Timor.

The Indonesian authorities had long claimed that granting independence to East Timor would encourage secessionist movements elsewhere and lead the Indonesian nation to disintegrate. It was thus unsurprising that following the East Timorese referendum, some Indonesian politicians lclaimed Australia's Government was trying to force Indonesia to grant independence to Irian Jaya/West Papua and Aceh. The canny head of Indonesia's MPR, Amien Rais, and several other politicians declared a short-lived 'boycott' of any meetings with Prime Minister John Howard during his February 2002 visit to Jakarta on the grounds of his government's support for these two secessionist movements. Despite the total implausibility of their claims, the Indonesian politicians concerned milked political mileage and enormous local and international media coverage. They effectively hijacked a media that proved easily and willingly captured by such specious hype. On Howard's arrival in the country, Australian journalists proved considerably more ready than the Indonesians to report on more substantial issues; many Indonesian journalists remained more interested in the boycott. This situation may have been remedied if the Australian team had:

- better identified issues of interest to the Indonesian media,
- provided a more fluent translation service at media events,
- more widely publicised last-minute changes in times of press conferences, and
- looked for opportunities for Indonesian journalists to ask questions at press conferences without being over-run by their more assertive and voluble Australian counterparts.

Several Indonesian newspapers have pointed to the irony that the Bali bombing has actually appeared to improve Australia-Indonesia relations. Australians and Indonesians have in a broader sense recognised that both countries have suffered loss, and there have been mass expressions of sympathy and willingness from both sides to offer and accept practical support.

In covering the bombing, both countries' media have focussed more on hometown angles. In exploring possible causes of the bombing, the Australian media gave much more prominence to theories about Australia's support of George W Bush, while Indonesia's media paid more attention to theories about efforts to destabilise Megawati Sukarnoputri's government. Both countries' media have to a large degree also been notably more robust in their criticism of their own governments than of the other country's government. For example, the Australian media has been more critical of the Australian Government involvement in coordinating the response to the disaster, while Indonesian criticism has been more directed towards Indonesian Government responses and the proliferation of small extremist groups, etc. Apart from small amounts of space or airtime dedicated to theories of FBI complicity in the bombing and concerns about allowing Australia RAAF planes on Indonesian soil, the response has been overwhelmingly one of working together. The current climate of teamwork allows a window to push – both in the media and other forums – messages of commitment to the bilateral connections and the benefits that cooperation and strong relations bring.

Strengthening the Relationship

Australia needs better mechanisms for providing information to the Indonesian media. As was mentioned above, relatively few Indonesian journalists have sufficiently well-developed contact networks to gather Australian opinions about crises or issues with the potential to damage bilateral relations. Nor do Indonesian journalists have the kinds of contacts that might lead them to write stories that might generate awareness or understanding of Australia in non-crisis conditions; such stories can help build the foundations that enable both countries to better communicate when emergencies or problematic issues do arise. Greater initiative should be taken in disseminating information and making interesting, articulate Australian sources available, especially when testing issues make the news.

Journalists need more opportunities to find out about positive issues affecting the two countries. Australian journalists are particularly interested in issues like business opportunities, culture and tourism. Indonesian journalists are strongly interested in Australian aid projects, collaborative ventures and business links in Indonesia, but often lack basic information about such activities. More efforts to publicise such initiatives would be worthwhile.

Language is often a barrier to such stories being promoted. Lack of Indonesian-language skills mean that many Australian journalists rely on a limited range of English-speaking sources for information. This has meant that coverage of complex issues – such as the coverage over the past year of issues relating to people smuggling, the Middle Eastern asylum seekers and refugee centres in Australia – is often regretably limited in its scope. Although Indonesian journalists may often appear in conversation to be fluent in English, their grasp of the nuances and even broad-scale intent of English-language press conferences and documentary information is often weak. For example, many English-language press conferences conducted by businesspeople in Jakarta are quite substantially misreported by the Indonesian media due to language problems. The provision of a translator or even a translated 'factsheet' of basic facts and figures usually overcomes such problems, but such assistance is very frequently neglected.

It would be productive if a small Indonesian-language 'factbook' or website could be established, with basic information about bilateral relations and contact details for *accessible* government, business, academic and other sources. Such a website might also have provision for Australians with interests in Indonesia to lodge and amend their details as issues arise, and perhaps also to upload brief summaries of issues that may be of media interest. Such a website would, however, need to be moderated.

In considering how Australian journalists cover Indonesia, successive Australian governments, university-level journalism educators and journalists with in-country experience have undertaken numerous initiatives to better inform and prepare Australian journalists for experience in Indonesia and other neighbouring Asia-Pacific countries. These include the journalism exchanges and dialogues between senior editors' sponsored by the Australia-Indonesia Institute, the media fellowships brokered by Medialink, and the Journalism

Professional Practicum organised by the Australian Consortium for In-Country Indonesian Studies (ACICIS).

Such programs help to overcome many of the problems discussed above, such as limited knowledge of language, history and culture when correspondents first arrive. They help journalists to establish footholds with local sources, so that they are not so dependent on culturally accessible opinions and views. I was involved in overseeing the design and enactment of ACICIS's first, six-week, annual Journalism Professional Practicum in January-February 2002. This program commenced with two weeks' study of basic language, history, politics and culture at a local university, followed by four weeks working alongside Indonesians in local newsrooms. The 13 early-career journalists and journalism students who participated faced a steep learning curve. Most participants underwent a visible and exponential process of development. Informal and formal feedback mechanisms suggest the personal experience was extremely rewarding.

Given that both Indonesia and Australia have an estimated 10,000 journalists each, the numbers who engage in such exchange programs and dialogues are comparatively minute. However, the pool of journalists who become foreign correspondents or who engage in substantive reporting on international affairs is also comparatively small in relation to the total number of journalists in either country. With careful selection, such exchange/dialogue programs can attempt to target participants who are likely to form the pool of current/future foreign correspondents and editorial decision makers.

Additionally, such programs have important ripple effects. From my observation of junior Australian journalists entering Indonesian newsrooms through the ACICIS Journalism Professional Practicum, most of the newsrooms that they worked with considered it a benefit that the interns were able to contribute Australian insights and story ideas with Australian angles. Many stories were published or broadcast only because of the Australia intern's presence. A few media organisations were also able to use the participants' training and professional insights to assess, and in some cases improve, their own services. Most importantly, some of the host media organisations – including the national TVRI, RRI and Antara services – have never previously accepted Australian visitors for this kind of experience. Most staff at these organisations had never previously had the opportunity to meet

with Australians. Informal feedback from both the Australian and Indonesian participants indicated that while the Australian visitors learnt much about Indonesia, their social and formal discussions with their Indonesian colleagues also resulted in the regularly debunking of Indonesian journalists' myths about Australia.

To date, most Indonesians who have participated in such programs have come from news organisations that target general middle-class audiences or the business community. This should continue. However, it would also be strategic to make greater efforts to include journalists from media organisations that target Indonesia's military and political parties.

In short, such programs can make an invaluable contribution to media and broader bilateral relations. It should be again stressed that the participants must be well chosen. Many Australia-Indonesia academic and media exchanges have been halted due to DFAT's current advice warning Australians against travel to Indonesia, ironically at a time when such exchanges might do most good. It is important that such programs be renewed as soon as it is practical to do so.