

The Importance of Media Monitoring: Indonesian Experience

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Currently, media monitoring activities are quite popular among civil society organizations in Indonesia. A number of NGOs focusing their work outside the media sector even do their own media monitoring activities with the purpose of supporting their own programs. Through their monitoring from time to time they can criticize if any media is being biased in reporting their activities.

As a movement, media monitoring in Indonesia began to spring up and grow rapidly since the fall of Soeharto's New Order regime in 1998. If one traced its history, however, NGOs such as the Yogya Institute of Research, Education, and Publications (LP3Y) has conducted media monitoring since the 1970s. Similarly, many schools of communication had practiced such a monitoring for a long time. However, the media monitoring movement during post-Soeharto era is much more popular rather than the media monitoring being conducted in such schools.

LP3Y and its networks were also encouraging activists to participate in the media monitoring movement post-Soeharto era. This endeavor was basically driven by an awareness of the misguided euphoria in responding to the press freedom. Press freedom, which should be accepted and defended as human rights value, was used by irresponsible people as a business opportunity in the field of media. At that time, at the end of the decade of the 90s, the government under Habibie, who replaced Soeharto, was easily to release the Publishing Business License (SIUPP). When the Department of Information was controversially closed by Abdurrachman Wahid (Gus Dur) who was elected as president in 1999, the SIUPP was automatically not needed anymore and consequently, in a very short time many new print media began publishing and was accompanied were followed by the sharply increased number of media workers. Unfortunately, most of such media workers had neither the experience nor capacity to become professional journalists.

Looking at the phenomenon of the unhealthy mediagrowth, senior journalists and media activists such as AshadiSiregar (LP3Y director), Daniel Dhakidae (R & D director of Kompas Daily), HotmanSiahaan (academic from the University of Airlangga), and other media experts, campaigned and disseminated their views regarding the importance of media monitoring. In his speeches among NGOs activists, AshadiSiregarsuggestedthat every media company should be ethically obliged to establish a division of ombudsmen having tasks to guarantee responsibility in implementing the ethical standards.

However, his proposal was not recognized and no mass-media company in Indonesia established such kind of division. Therefore, Ashadi and other senior activists encouraged civil society organizations, particularly NGOs that concern with the media condition in the country to conduct media monitoring.

In response to such encouragements, the Institute for the Studies on Free Flow Information (ISAI) in Jakarta, in cooperation with the LP3Y, immediately began networking activities with a number of NGOs across the country such as KIPPAS in Medan (North Sumatra), Radio MARA in Bandung (West Java), Institute for the Studies on Press and Information (LeSPI) in Semarang (Central Java), Institute for Press and Society Studies (LSPS) in Surabaya (East Java), and Institute for Information and Media Studies (eLSIM) in Makassar (South Sulawesi).

In conducting media monitoring, this NGOs network initially received financial support from USAID for three years (1999 - 2002) under the media and democratization program. However, the contract gave a freedom to each fund recipient to determine and emphasize its own programs and activities. LeSPI and Radio MARA, for example, practiced media monitoring as a minor program while they emphasized their activities on training and advocacy.

Despite the discontinuation of the grant was not continued after the three-year contract with USAID ended in 2002, each member of the network continued its media monitoring activities irregularly with the support from some other funding agencies such as Ford Foundation and local institutions that were interested in the media monitoring program with a smaller budget.

Methods

Media monitoring activities is basically a research on the media. This requires an ability to follow or even create a valid methodology as a way to bring about findings being consistent with the goal of research.

In carrying out the media monitoring activities through the network of ISAI and LP3Y, each institution was free to choose and develop its own methods. However, at the beginning of such activities in 1999, ISAI in collaboration with LP3Y prepared network members by inviting them to participate in a workshop on to develop a media monitoring methodology. Three main elements of the monitoring methodology identified in the workshop were content analysis, discourse analysis and framing analysis.

a) Content Analysis

Content analysis of media is a quantitative method that provides an objective and systematic way to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or articles in the media. Media analysts make inferences about the messages within the texts by quantifying and analyzing the presence, meanings and relationships of words or concepts of such texts. Content analysis describes the thematic content of communication and aims to make conclusions about the values of individuals or groups, sentiments, purposes, or ideologies as expressed in the contents of the communication messages. In content analysis, the media analyst measure (calculate) number of messages that are contained in the mass media.

Advantages of applying content analysis method are: (1) it is practical and easy to conclude the results; (2) it is readily available sampled material of research; (3) it has no need to involve the respondent; (4) the data generated can be quantified with the help of statistical approach, (5) it allows an assessment of the enclosed text contained in specific categories; and (6) it enables discussing issues or events that the media presented in the past or present (or both if researchers want to do the comparison).

But the weakness of content analysis consists are that: (1) it is difficult to ascertain whether the sample to be assessed would be fairly representative; (2) it is difficult to get a precise definition of the topic under review, namely what is meant by "public interest", or "public"; (3) it is extremely time and labor consuming; (4) it is reductive, particularly when researchers deal with complex texts; and (5) it ignores the context when the text is produced (meaning it does not pay attention to the message production process, such as news, editorial, advertising, etc. and social circumstances surrounding the emergence of an audience of text).

b) Framing Analysis

Framing Analysis is a way to reveal the secrets behind the differences, even contradictions in the media, to reveal the facts. This method seeks to dismantle what the reality is framed by the media. Through framing analysis, researchers will be able to know how reality is constructed by the media, the techniques and ways as to what events are highlighted, or even if there is a section omitted or even hidden.

The strengths of the framing analysis are that: (1) it enables researchers to describe the background of issues covered or uncovered by a certain media; and (2) it provides researchers to be free to develop their critical thinking in discovering a reality behind the media. These strengths were followed by weaknesses associated with its qualitative character on how it usually compels the readers to be patient in concluding or interpreting the description.

c. Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is a qualitative approach that focuses on the use of language in communicating both concerning the structure of the message, the social relations of the speakers or the symbol system used. In discourse analysis, the use of language is traced through the text to discover the ideological position of the story and its connection with a wider structure. Through such an analysis, researchers can find a critical understanding of the

relationship between media products and the economics, politics or ideology behind them. These linkages can be raised when the discourse analysis moves toward the question of how language works in context and why the language is used in a particular context and not to others.

Discourse analysis provides a space for readers to understand the messages of the texts in greater depth and breadth. But if the researchers are not careful in devoting themselves in the analysis, they may be led towards to the philosophy of language that can create a gap to the readers from objective reality.

It should be noted that the methodology of media monitoring highly depends on the objectives formulated at the beginning of the research. Such objectives will be followed by variables and indicators that will affect the depth of its findings. In addition, media monitoring does not merely focus on media products. Rather, media monitoring can freely explore how the media workers carry out their jobs. The 2nd Phase of Pantau Magazine is a good example. If previously in its 1st Phase, the magazine was maintained for publishing the results of content and framing analysis on certain issue (and mostly on politics coverage), then in its 2nd Phase the magazine contained facts-based stories on the media in its broadest sense. Most articles offered in this 2nd Phase were based on a qualitative research being written in a literature way. Unfortunately, this magazine could not be sustained for its difficulties in finding support from any funding agency.

Issues/Topics

There are no restrictions in setting the issue or topic to be covered by media monitoring activities. But during the early stage in 1999, each media monitoring institution were focusing elections in their respective locations. The question being answered simultaneously by each media monitoring agency is how the media in their areas covered the elections.

After the 1999 election was over, political, economic, gender equality and human rights issues were rampant in Indonesia. These problems have pushed each monitoring agency to question the attitude of the media in covering these issues. The results were works that recorded and criticized the media position in reporting the issues. For example, the LSPS in Surabaya, besides continuously producing articles in the *Journal Sendi* about their reporting on local politics reporting also, produced a very comprehensive book entitled *Pers Yang Gamang* (“The Suspicious Press”). This book demonstrated doubts on mass media in reporting of human rights abuses by Indonesian troops in Timor Leste after the referendum in 2001.

In the West, the media analysts at KIPPAS also highlighted media bias in reporting the conflict in Nangroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD). Similarly in eastern Indonesia, media analysts at LSIM criticized reporting on the conflict situation in Ambon and Papua.

Beneficiaries

The question that frequently addressed to media analysts is: to whom will their work be dedicated? The easiest and simplest answer is to the general public and media workers. This answer is of course still needs to be specified because not all media workers are willing to positively accept the results of media monitoring. In the beginning of the media monitoring movement, when the program was introduced to the public, many media workers found themselves being watched. They even suggested the need for the monitoring of media monitoring.

However, some journalists and editors, particularly those who work for the mainstream media, faced such a movement fairly. They even openly provided themselves as resource persons or informants during the research. A better attitude toward media monitoring was demonstrated when some printed media were threatened or even attacked by group of people who found themselves to be victims of media coverage. Violence against media or journalists had opened the mind of media workers to view the criticism advanced by media analysts in a better light.

Besides media workers, NGOs activists and academics find media monitoring as a valuable resources to support their work. NGOs activists often benefited from such findings that strengthen their programs. Women and gender rights advocates , for instance, benefited from the results of media monitoring on issues of gender bias in media coverage. They then used such results for supporting their advocacy or campaign program. A similar use of media monitoring was also practiced by NGOs activists working on other fields such as environment, corruption, politics, and the like.

Academics benefited from the results of media monitoring as additional sources of research on their academic work. This is why academics are generally very enthusiastic to accept invitations of media monitoring institutions to present the results of the study.

Apparently, the beneficiary is the public at large. The presence of media monitoring had made people more aware of the media. They are more active to invite the media analysts to be a speaker in seminars or discussions . What is even more encouraging is the increasing number of young bloggers who disseminate the results of media monitoring studies into their communities. Their willingness to disseminate such a study is a sign that they read the results of media monitoring and see fit to share with others.

Challenges

Each research activity require time, effort and costs that are not small--so too in the monitoring of media activities. The time and effort of researchers is the easy part as they can fill these with their spirit. However, the cost of research is not easily obtained from governments, particularly in developing countries where people do not view research as a priority activity that should be budgeted. As a result, monitoring of media activities is highly dependent on donor agencies that have similar programs.

Another challenge is how the media monitoring activities formulate the results of research into language that is simpler and easier to understand. Such efforts are more difficult to fulfill with the use of framing analysis, discourse analysis or other qualitative methods which require lengthy and detailed explanations.

The 2nd Phase *Pantau magazine* is one attempt to address this challenge. Without reducing the depth and sharpness of their qualitative analysis, the researchers wrote their studies in a more literary manner. Reading articles in the *Pantau Magazine* was akin to reading literature about the facts of the world media. This magazine eventually had to close due to the costs of research that no longer received support from donors.

Last but not least, no less important than the above challenges is the temptation to display the results of the media monitoring as academic work. From time to time the media analysts tend to work as academics who are consequently limiting their audience to academics and researchers. They certainly are not entirely wrong but it is difficult for activists or lay people to understand their academic language.***

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