Indonesian Photojournalists, the Construction of Their Professional Identity and the Constant Negotiation against its Continuous Dilemma

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Abstract

The question this writing aims to address is straightforward: what do photojournalists do? At a glimpse, this seems to be an easy question to answer. Yet, institutional attempt to formally answer this question has only be made recently by Indonesian Photojournalists' Association (Pewarta Foto Indonesia, hereinafter PFI) - a professional organization comprising of more than 800 members in 20 cities in the country. With demands of the ASEAN Economic Community as the backdrop, following the footsteps of fellow journalistic associations such as radio, television and print journalists - they initiated the first-ever process to set up its standard of competence. This was key, as Indonesia witnessed how lack of professionalism in the media has tainted the long-awaited post-New Order freedom of speech with poor quality of journalistic works - epitomized by the way local media reported ethnic and religious conflicts (Soerjoatmodjo, 2010). Safeguarding the media with standard of competence may contribute to the reduction of violence used by various groups against the media and to strengthen journalists' resilience. This resonates in such urgency in photojournalism sector – as most printed media, compared to online media for example, suffer from lack of revenues.

Keywords: Photojournalism, Professional Identity, Indonesian Photojournalists' Association

BACKGROUND

The question this writing aims to address is straightforward: what do photojournalists do? At a glimpse, this seems to be an easy question to answer. Yet, institutional attempt to formally answer this question has only be made recently

by Indonesian Photojournalists' Association (Pewarta Foto Indonesia, hereinafter PFI) - a professional organization comprising of more than 800 members in 20 cities in the country. With demands of the ASEAN Economic Community as the backdrop, following the footsteps of fellow journalistic associations such as radio, television and print journalists - they initiated the first-ever process to set up its standard of competence (Soerjoatmodjo, 2016). This was key, as Indonesia witnessed how lack of professionalism in the media has tainted the long-awaited post-New Order freedom of speech with poor quality of journalistic works - epitomized by the way local media reported ethnic and religious conflicts (Soerjoatmodjo, 2010). Safeguarding the media with standard of competence may contribute to the reduction of violence used by various groups against the media and to strengthen journalists' resilience (Soerjoatmodjo, 2011 & Soerjoatmodjo, 2013). This resonates in such urgency in photojournalism sector – as most printed media, compared to online media for example, suffer from lack of revenues.

To do so, as advised by Romani and Szkudlarek (2014), Indonesian photojournalists need to clearly understand who they are, who they are not and, in consequences, who others are and are not. In other words, they need to have a clear idea on their own identity – a concept that permeates into the creation of meaning, motivation, commitment, loyalty, logics of action, decision-making, stability, change, leadership, group relations, collaboration and so fort (Gunz & Gunz, 2007). It should be declared here that the author herself used to work as a print journalist and is married to a former photojournalist. While familiarity of the subject contributes to increased sensitivity, objectivity is maintained throughout data collection and analysis through the use of research assistants and collaborators.

In the post-Soeharto reformasi (reform) era, Jakarta and numerous key urban settings in Indonesia witnessed how unprecedented press freedom changed the country's social political platform. Various cities then pushed for progress, oftentimes vis-à-vis with violence such as bomb terror (Soerjoatmodjo, 2011), the media showed an exponential increase in terms of numbers. Unfortunately, this has led media organizations to hire individuals with few or even no qualifications or experience at all to catch up with the public thirst for information. This brings problems in professional standards, as exemplified most prominently on the case of

media reports on Maluku conflict (Soerjoatmodjo, 2010).

To address this issue, for the first time after 18 years of establishment, Indonesian Photojournalists' Association (Pewarta Foto Indonesia, hereinafter PFI) as a professional organization comprising of more than 800 photojournalists in 20 cities in the country, assembles its very own standard of competence to leverage its bargaining position in the ASEAN level (Soerjoatmodjo, 2016).

This speaks volume in the moment when photojournalism is considered as suffering from the lack of venue due to the decline of revenues for newspapers and magazines as its main source of funding – which is paradoxical in a world of hundreds of television channels, thousands of magazines and the online world.

OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

This paper tries to capture how Indonesia's photojournalists describe their professional identity – a relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a workrelated role (Ibarra, 1999 in Dobrow & Semi-structured interviews as strategy for inquiry on 11 experts, purposively sampled by

Higgins, 2006 and Khapova, Arthur & Slay, 2011). It is a psychological construct involved considering not only the close and immediate drivers of this identity but also the influences of other stakeholders or audiences in their interaction with broader settings (Brouard, et. al. 2016). It represents a projection of oneself in the future in the career path (Durban 1991 & 1992 in CohenScali, 2003). Regardless of the centrality of this construct, Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann (2006) show there is little research on how professional construct professional identity, in spite of the increasing interest of the importance of professionalism in organization and how identity contributes to the discourse. This paper hopes to contribute to the further development of the body of knowledge of psychology and communication science disciplines.

METHODOLOGY

The research question is: what do photojournalists do? Such question and the novelty of this endeavour dictate the use of qualitative research design which allows an in-depth investigation (Brouard et. al., 2016, Rodgers & Scott, 2008).

PFI, to represent its organizational diversity.

Interviews and transcriptions from the

collected data are done with the help of research assistants and conducted from April to May 2017.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is used as approach in data analysis – as it navigates the complexities and contradictions of a particular experience of a particular person, offering a rich account (Oakland, MacDonald & Flowers, 2013).

Triangulation is attempted through a focus group discussion in June 2017 in Antara Photojournalistic Gallery (Galeri Fotojournalistik Antara) and the Press Council (Dewan Pers) with the abovementioned experts alongside with PFI officials, as it allows convergence among different sources of information to reflect multiple ways of establishing reality and opens doors for verification and clarification (Golafshani, 2003).

Table 1. Research Subjects

No	Subject	Gender	Qualification
1	AP	M	A photography lecturer, specializing in photojournalism
2	AR	M	A photojournalist from a national news media
3	BW	M	A photojournalist from an international news media
4	DW	M	A photojournalist from a photo agency
5	EW	M	A freelance photojournalist
6	EP	M	A photojournalist from a photo agency
7	EN	F	A former photo editor from an international news agency
8	H	M	A photo editor from a national news media
9	P	M	A communication lecturer
10	OM	M	A curator of a photojournalistic gallery
11	YS	M	A researcher on the history of Indonesia photojournalism

In June 2017, a focus group discussion with the abovementioned experts is conducted as a means for triangulation to eliminate bias by attempting convergence among different source

of information to reflect multiple ways of establishing reality (Golafshani, 2003). This forum allows verification and clarification which later enables insights to be further used in the layers of analysis.

Figure 1. Focus Group Discussion with PFI experts

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the research question on what photojournalists do, this writing concludes that Indonesian photojournalists aspire to be visual scribers of Indonesia to the global stage. Yet, in order to present their view as visual scribers of Indonesia to the world, the construction of their professional identity are encapsulated in the constant negotiation against the very own continuous dilemma of their profession. Those dilemma are as follow.

Dilemma 1: Subjectivity-Objectivity

As photojournalism dictates objectivity to preserve the neutrality of the press, photojournalists often use their subjectivity in opting angle, point of view, types of lenses and other photography techniques as well as photo editing.

Dilemma 2: Object-Subject

As photojournalism aims to portray reality for the audience so they can conclude their own opinions, photojournalists capture people and events in their own narrative, allowing their voices to thrust into the discourse and be taken into account into the process of meaning making.

Dilemma 3: Risk-Safety

Quoting the late Robert Capa (1913-1954) "If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough" – photojournalists walk the thin line of risk versus safety in their daily professional life, which oftentimes place their own personal well-being in limbo. *Dilemma 4: Independence-Teamwork*

Although photojournalism is essentially an independent work, unlike other form of journalism e.g. television, collaboration with journalists and fellow photojournalists – even from their own business competitors – are frequently required to 'bring home the bacon.' Being professional put photojournalists in never-ending tensions between the abovementioned perpetual dilemma. These dilemmas pull them into opposite direction,

all take place in pressing deadlines. Hence the notion of professional identity is very much dynamic and in constant fluidity. This research identifies a lurking issue faced by Indonesian photojournalists due to their contractual relations with the media – in this case, a freelance status. It turns out that this way of working is slipping away from the legal accommodation in the professional standard of competence endeavor initiated by PFI according to its mandate from Indonesian Press Council. This finding resonates Bjerregaard, Haslam, Morton & Ryan (2015) that as incentives validating identities at workplace are nonexisting, motivation to engage in their work is also slippery.

It can be concluded that it turns out that there is no straight forward answer to this seemingly simple question due to the complexity of this profession which places the core issue of identity in perpetual paradoxes. Who they are, who they are not and, by implication, who others in a professional role as photojournalists are indeed a social construction - involving not only the proximate and direct drivers of this identity but also the influences of other audiences in relation to one another in the broader environment. Freelancer photojournalists represent a much worse

picture. While freelancer photojournalists deal with the perplexing paradoxes as those who are working as employees to media organizations, the persistent uncertainties from their status add a bigger fish to fry on their plates. The necessity of continuously building their capacity to improve their qualification is taking the back seat as they are busy catering the public thirst for information vis-à-vis complex issues such as photojournalism code of ethics.

For PFI as a professional association, this represents a challenge to be address. While professional identity is established and supported by the infrastructure which contributes to forming a shared sense of commonality amongst fellow photojournalists, their freelancer teammates seem to slip through the cracks.

It should be taken into consideration bearing in mind that a world of hundreds of television channels, thousands of magazines and the online world, print media – as main stakeholders in photojournalism including the freelancer ones - collapses one by one as they shift into digital world, due to lack of fund.

In constant balancing of those paradoxical tensions, becoming visual scribes to showcase the world their version of

reality of Indonesia through the lens is the anchor

of the professional identity of Indonesia's photojournalists. This resonates with Knez (2016) that work-related identification implies not only individual and social classification, but also collection of knowledge structures related to particular situations which allow us to be involved in various social process served as a guide for our perception, interpretation and

understanding of the situation at and the people involved.

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