



# Justice and journalism: Islam and journalistic values in Indonesia and Malaysia

Journalism  
12(5) 533–549  
© The Author(s) 2011  
Reprints and permission: sagepub.  
co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/1464884910388234  
jou.sagepub.com  


**Janet Steele**

George Washington University, USA

## **Abstract**

As the Global War on Terror has prompted new interest in Islam in Southeast Asia, western governments have scrambled to engage with Muslim journalists in Indonesia and Malaysia. Despite this attention, surprisingly little is known about how journalists in these two majority Muslim countries actually think about the work they do. This article draws on a series of semi-structured interviews with elite journalists in Jakarta, Surabaya, and Kuala Lumpur to provide some preliminary explorations of the relationship between Islam and journalism in Southeast Asia. It argues that Muslim journalists in both Indonesia and Malaysia express the universal values of journalism, but do so within an Islamic idiom. It concludes with a discussion of justice as the overarching ideology of journalism in Islam, and a comment on how western diplomats might use the language of Islam to reach out to journalists in these two majority Muslim countries.

## **Keywords**

balance, independence, Indonesia, Islam, justice, journalistic values, Malaysia, Southeast Asia, verification

The Global War on Terror has prompted new interest in Islam in Southeast Asia. Journalists, diplomats, and policymakers have recently discovered that Islam in Indonesia and Malaysia has quite a different face than that of its relative on ‘Arab Street’. As western governments scramble to engage with what is widely perceived to be a more syncretic, less hard-line version of Islam, one of the most commonly used tools of public diplomacy has been the effort to reach out to journalists.

Indonesia and Malaysia, two majority Muslim countries in Southeast Asia, are of particular interest to western diplomats. The transition to democracy in Indonesia after

---

## **Corresponding author:**

Janet Steele, School of Media and Public Affairs, George Washington University, 805 21st St. NW, Ste. 400, Washington, DC 20052, USA

Email: [jesteele@gwu.edu](mailto:jesteele@gwu.edu)

the 1998 fall of Soeharto sparked considerable US-sponsored efforts to promote press freedom (LaMay, 2007). Malaysia, a more stable 'consociational' democracy with authoritarian press controls (Crouch, 1996), has similarly been the target of quiet efforts to promote a more general understanding of the role of a free press in a democracy.

Although Indonesian journalists in particular have been the object of much outreach from western governments, surprisingly little is known about how journalists in the world's most populous Muslim country actually think about the work they do. Scholarly work has focused on individual publications (Steele, 2005; Tarrant, 2008), the overall press system (Hill, 1994; Romano, 2003) or the transition to democracy (Heng, 2002; McCargo, 2003).

Deadly suicide bombings in Bali and Jakarta prompted a new focus on Islamic media, especially cyber-media, and their possible links to terrorism (Lim, 2005). Research suggesting that journalists in Arab countries see their primary mission as social and political reform (Pintak and Ginges, 2008) raises important parallel questions in Southeast Asia that are as yet unanswered. With few exceptions, the day-to-day habits, thoughts and ideology of mainstream journalists in Indonesia and Malaysia have remained unexplored.

Inspired by the work of Herbert Gans (1979), this article draws on a series of semi-structured interviews with elite journalists in Jakarta, Surabaya, and Kuala Lumpur to provide preliminary explorations of the relationship between Islam and journalism in these two majority Muslim countries of Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> It argues that Muslim journalists in both Indonesia and Malaysia express the universal values of journalism, but do so within an Islamic idiom and, more generally, see and understand the significance of their work through the prism of Islam.

## **Universal values in a local context: Islam, journalism, and Southeast Asia**

The history of Islam in Southeast Asia is one of universal values being expressed in a local idiom. Islam is believed to have entered Southeast Asia during the 13th century, brought by traders from the Indian subcontinent to northern Sumatra. Over the next three centuries the message of Islam spread rapidly, in many cases absorbing cosmologies brought by earlier waves of trade from China and India. The high tide of conversions occurred between 1400 and 1650, and coincided with the beginnings of European colonization (Reid, 1993).

Consolidation of colonial rule in the 19th century brought numerous changes to Southeast Asia, including notions of the secular state that had profound implications for both Islam and journalism. What Hefner called the 'near-universal' conviction among 20th-century social scientists 'that religion is, at best, a declining historical force, destined to give way to the twin forces of economic modernization and nation-state formation' (1997: 18) has continued to influence the way that religion is understood in relation to the development of a modern press system. The 1950s modernization theorists were especially dismissive of the relationship between religion and communication in modern societies. Daniel Lerner, for example, wrote 'whether from East or West, modernization poses the same basic challenge – the infusion of "a rationalist and positivist spirit" against which, scholars seem agreed, Islam is absolutely defenseless' (2000[1958]: 120).

Despite Lerner's conviction that a modern society would inevitably be secular, a half century later this has not occurred. As Mowlana has argued, whereas religion in the West is divorced from secular life, and ethical conduct is left to the conscience of the individual, in Islam 'this separation of the religious from the secular sphere did not materialise, and if attempts were made by the late modernizers to do this, the process was never completed' (2003: 309). Moreover, what western academic discourse generally sees as a sharp distinction between religious and secular worldviews has been challenged by scholars who question the assumption that liberal secularism is completely divorced from normative conceptions of religion (Mahmood, 2009).

The Islamic revivalism of the late 20th century has prompted some to argue for an Islamic theory of communication. Mowlana suggests that an 'Islamic Community Paradigm' based on revelation rather than information infuses communication in Islamic countries (1993: 12). Khiabany, on the other hand, cautions against reductionism, and observes that a variety of media are consumed by Muslims in a variety of countries that may or may not be majority Muslim (2006: 5–7). Although Indonesia has a significant sector of media devoted to propagating Islamic values, including magazines such as *Sabili*, *Media Dakwah*, *Suara Hidayatullah*, and (to a lesser extent) the newspaper *Republika*, (Liddle, 1996; Lim, 2005), they are not the primary focus of this article. Most journalists in Indonesia and Malaysia do not work for overtly Islamic publications, and this study concentrates on them. While its results reject the notion of an Islamic theory of journalism, they likewise reject the 'common sense' view of western theorists that journalism is a fundamentally secular enterprise.

Muslim scholars have argued that there is significant justification for press freedom in Islam. Kamali contends that the principles of commanding good and forbidding evil, sincere advice, consultation, independent reasoning, and the right to criticize government leaders are each premised on the recognition of freedom of expression that is basic to the *Shari'ah*, or divine law of Islam (2002: 26). Although journalists interviewed in Indonesia and Malaysia frequently referred to passages from the Qur'an in talking about their day-to-day work, their knowledge of Islam is not the focus of this study, nor is the accuracy of their interpretation. Rather our concern is with how ordinary journalists working for mainstream media in Indonesia and Malaysia anchor the meaning of their work in a context of Islam.

As Nasr writes, the 'heart of Islam', as expressed in the *shahādah* or profession of faith is the reality and oneness of God, 'there is no god but God'. This oneness, which is called *tawhīd*, is 'beyond all duality and relationally', and 'the axis around which all that is Islamic revolves' (2002: 3). In Islam, the oneness of God means that the political well-being of the community is not a 'distraction' from religion, but the 'stuff of religion itself' (Armstrong, 2002: xi). The fundamental goals of Islam – a just society in which all members are treated with respect – are part of a totality, a path or *Shari'ah* that encompasses all aspects of life.

In western democracies, journalism is generally understood to be a secular occupation. In the United States, popular understanding of the role of the press is rooted in the ideas of the Enlightenment, and the doctrine of natural rights (Levy, 1985). American journalists' understanding of press freedom grew out of this Enlightenment model, in which the press is seen as a defender of the people against the arbitrary power of the state (Bailyn, 1967). In Islamic jurisprudence, by contrast, both legal and moral values are

determined by divine revelation. Kamali explains that unlike modern constitutional law, the *Shari'ah* is inspired by the unity of God and man.

Islamic law does not proceed from a position of conflict between the respective rights or interests of the individual and state ... thus the duality of interest which is often envisaged in modern constitutions does not present the same picture as in the Islamic theory of government. (2000: 18)

Because of this, many occupations which would be considered in the West to be in the social or political sphere are understood in Islamic societies to have a religious component, even if at an unconscious level.

There are recurring patterns in what Muslim journalists in Indonesia and Malaysia say about the meaning of their work – even among those who are employed by so-called secular publications like *Tempo* magazine in Jakarta, or alternative media such as *Malaysiakini.com* in Kuala Lumpur. Although several informants initially assumed that I was asking about recent threats to secular news organizations from religious conservatives, once I explained that my real interest was in the relationship between the values of journalism and the teachings of Islam, they generally responded in the language of religion. For example as former *Indonesia Raya* managing editor Atmakusumah said, the goal of journalism ‘is to reach for goodness’.<sup>2</sup>

This is what is called *jihad*. In my interpretation, jihad is not [the kind of militant terrorism represented by] Noordin M. Top! In our book, *Mochtar Lubis, Wartawan Jihad* [Mochtar Lubis, Jihad Journalist] we called *Indonesia Raya* a jihad newspaper. To reach for justice, for goodness, for progress, that’s what journalism is. Yes, unconsciously, since we were little, we learned this [vocabulary of Islam] in school. We studied Islam. And I don’t see a difference between our religion and journalism. It’s exactly parallel. Jihad can be a war, but it can also be a struggle for self-defense, for justice, for truth. It’s the same. There is no difference with Islam.

*Malaysiakini*’s Fathi Aris Omar similarly said, ‘in terms of ethics, journalism is almost 100 percent the same as the goals of religion: to seek justice, to help the poor, to promote equal distribution of wealth, and to fight against corruption’.<sup>3</sup>

## Values of journalism

Since Herbert Gans undertook his study of CBS, NBC, and *Newsweek* magazines and wrote about how American journalists ‘decide what’s news’, there has been little replication of his work overseas. Gans used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to examine how the nation and society are depicted in American journalism. Beyond this, he also determined the ‘enduring values’ that suffuse news reports. In the case of the USA, these values include ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, and individualism (1979:42).

Indonesians are well acquainted with western principles of journalism. The Dr Soetomo Press Institute has been conducting training in the basics of journalism since its establishment in 1988. Goenawan Mohamad’s Institute for the Study of the Free-Flow of Information (ISAI) has received USAID funding to assist in the development of press

freedom (Steele, 2005). ISAI and the Pantau Institute translated Kovach and Rosenstiel's *Elements of Journalism* (2001) with a grant from the US Department of State, and have conducted training throughout the Indonesian archipelago.

But when Indonesian journalists use terms such as truth and verification, what exactly do they mean? In the sections that follow, I examine four basic elements of journalism: truth, balance, verification, and independence from power, and illustrate how they are understood by journalists in Indonesia and Malaysia. I conclude with a discussion of justice as the overarching ideology of journalism in Islam, and a comment on how the West might use the idiom of Islam to reach out to journalists in the majority Muslim countries of Southeast Asia.

### Truth

Kovach and Rosenstiel state that a journalist's first obligation is to the truth. The notion of bringing truth to people resonates with Indonesian and Malaysian journalists, even with those who say that they don't consciously think about Islamic values in doing their jobs. For example, publisher and former journalist Yusi Pareanom began a discussion of the significance of his work with the Muslim obligation to share revelation with others.

I am seldom asked why I became a journalist. At a time when I was much younger, it is one of our duties, *tabligh*, to spread words, or to share. The Prophet was given revelation. But he didn't just get God's word, he also delivered the message. Now, spreading the word, I don't think that we are like the Prophet, but I'm a part of that kind of process and that makes me happy, you know? And according to me, that's interesting. Because you cannot achieve the highest status of the Prophet, but at least you can work in the same area. [Laughs.]<sup>4</sup>

When asked about the relationship between his faith and his work, *Surabaya Post* editor Dhimam Abror also began with the Qur'anic obligation to tell others the truth, even if you know only one verse.

We believe that the Prophet Mohammad says if you get from me only one verse from the Qur'an, you have an obligation to tell that verse to other people. I think that yes, *dakwah* [propagation] in the biggest understanding is *dakwah* in front of many people, but *dakwah* in the smallest understanding is that if you only know one verse from the Qur'an, you have an obligation to tell it to other people.<sup>5</sup>

Of course the fact that something is true doesn't automatically mean that it can be published. An Indonesian instructional text called *Fikih Jurnalistik* [Journalistic jurisprudence] (Anam, 2009), subtitled 'press freedom and ethics according to Islam', devotes several chapters to limitations on freedom of the press, including prohibitions against gossip, libel, and other defamation. The Indonesian intellectual, writer, and publisher Haidar Bagir pointed out that the teachings of Islam have a great deal to say about journalism, and what can and cannot be published. For example, it is 'completely forbidden' to divulge what passes between a husband and wife in the bedroom. Exposing something shameful about another person is also forbidden, as is backbiting.<sup>6</sup>

Malaysian journalist Fauwaz Abdul Aziz shared this discomfort with gossip to the point that he left the online news organization *Malaysiakini* in 2008 partly because of what he viewed as the difficulty of reconciling his faith with his work as a journalist. He explained:

There are certain things you do as a journalist that don't exactly jive with what a religious person can or cannot, should or should not be doing. Say that somebody is accused of a sexual impropriety. You don't even mention that act of impropriety unless you have concrete proof. In religion this would be so grave, that in an Islamic state, or during the time of the Prophet, you would be guilty of falsely accusing somebody. There are punishments in the Qur'an, corporal punishment. And all of the people in that chain of disseminating [the story] would be punished as well.<sup>7</sup>

In his text on Islamic journalistic law, Anam goes even further, stating that reports of sexual impropriety may not be published until they have been proven in a court of law – even if a confession has been made in front of a journalist (2009: 100).

The question of when a Muslim journalist can properly divulge something negative about someone else has implications for the popular understanding of libel and defamation. For example, when *Tempo* magazine published an investigative report in January 2007 that accused palm-oil producer Asian Agri of tax evasion, the company sued for defamation (*Tempo*, 2007). Despite the fact that the story was defended by the Indonesian Press Council, judges in the lower court ruled that the magazine had damaged the company's reputation. Although the lower court's decision was overturned in 2009, the company's claim that it had been the victim of 'trial by the press' (Jurusan Ilmu Komunikasi, 2007: 52–60) seemed to resonate with the public.

Bambang Harymurti, the corporate editor of *Tempo*, completely rejects the notion that 'trial by the press' should in any way be related to the teachings of Islam, arguing instead that the concept was cynically created by the former New Order regime in order to quell legitimate criticism of the government.<sup>8</sup> *Republika* columnist and director Haidar Bagir takes a middle path, arguing that even in Islam there are exceptions to the general prohibition against reporting charges that have not yet been proven in court. The exceptions are based on the Islamic concept of public interest, or *maslahah* (Kamali, 2000: 22). Haidar explains:

If a leader gets involved in a sex scandal, it is permitted to be divulged. [But] certainly it can only be done so far as is necessary. Don't be excessive! [With] gossip, infotainment, where is the public interest? It is clear that there is none. There the general rule applies.

'Trial by the press' applies if you don't cover both sides, or if you don't have sufficient, substantial, and material proof. If there isn't enough information, you can't write. The general rule is to restrain yourself. You have to cover both sides.

Gans noted that American journalists tended not to focus on the implications of their work, pointing out that such a focus could lead to paralysis (1979: 188–90). In Indonesia, the popular understanding of journalists' responsibility for the outcome of their work is different (Steele, 2005). Whether this is entirely because of Islam is unclear, although

there appears to be a consensus that journalists should be attuned to the consequences of their work. As Keane (2009) suggests, in Indonesia published words and pictures are not seen as being distinct from the actors or media that produce them. This focus on implications and outcomes may further be related to the popularity and persistence of the above-mentioned notion of ‘trial by the press’.

### Verification

The instruction that believers must be skeptical of those who come bearing news is an important lesson of Islam and one that is frequently cited by Indonesian and Malaysian journalists who are well-versed in the Qur’an. *Surabaya Post* editor Dhimam Abror said that the Qur’an is quite explicit on the idea of good journalism, making it clear that ‘if one of the faithful is approached by an unreliable person, it is his obligation to look for an explanation’. Herry Nurdi, the editor of the Islamic magazine *Sabili*, said much the same thing. ‘In Islam it’s like this, when there is a report, it is ordered in the Qur’an to verify. I have said to our friends, as Muslims, you are going to be responsible to God later, if you don’t do the process of verification.’<sup>9</sup>

Huda Noor Ismail, who cut his teeth working for the Indonesia bureau of the *Washington Post*, also cited the same passage. Huda became interested in journalism when he edited a student magazine at Ngruki pesantren – a Muslim boarding school that has in recent years become famous for graduating many of Indonesia’s best-known terrorists. Huda translated the passage in the Qur’an that the other journalists had cited,<sup>10</sup> and explained:

‘When you meet a *fasiq* [unreliable] person with news, you have to look for verification, because if you don’t you will regret it.’ So because of that I was conscious of the need for verification in my writing. When I was fifteen and had a magazine called *al Kalam*, or pen, I knew exactly the need for verification.<sup>11</sup>

Indonesian and Malaysian journalists often mention verification within one additional context: *isnād*, or the process of following ‘the chain of transmission’ of the sayings and acts of the Prophet and his Companions. Generally speaking, *isnād* takes the form of ‘it has been related to me by A on the authority of B on the authority of C on the authority of D (usually a Companion of the Prophet) that Muhammad said ...’.<sup>12</sup> Aslan explains, ‘those hadith whose *isnad* could be traced to an early and reliable source were considered “sound” and accepted as authentic, while those that could not were considered “weak” and rejected’ (2006: 163). Anam (2009) explicitly connects *isnād* with the process of journalistic verification in *Fikih Jurnalistik* [Journalistic Law], noting that when a journalist hears a story he or she must ask ‘Who said that? From where did you hear about this?’ (2009: 57)

Although Dhimam Abror of the *Surabaya Post* was the first to explain to me how *isnād* was related to journalism, I had previously heard the *process* described in almost identical language 10 years earlier. In 2000, *Tempo*’s Bambang Harymurti related how he had ‘followed the chain’ of evidence in reporting on the 1984 incident at Tanjung Priok (Steele, 2005). In this bloody and still unresolved incident, dozens and possibly hundreds

of Muslim protestors were killed by the Indonesian army. Bambang, who was a cub reporter at the time, described his activities the morning after the incident:

And then I met some sources there and then I sort of followed the chain. They would say I was there, but it happened earlier and my friend was there and so you go to that friend ... but it was quite exhausting. They would say a thousand people were shot dead. My brother saw the bodies. And then I went to the brother and you hear all these things. And at the time you ask were you really there? And they say no, actually I was not there, I heard this from my neighbor. So you keep following the line.<sup>13</sup>

Bambang's words directly parallel the process of *isnād*. Consciously or not, he was using the idiom of Islam to explain his work as a journalist.

### Balance

When Indonesian journalists refer to balanced stories, they generally use the word *seimbang*. As in English, a synonym for balance in news is 'fair', which Indonesians translate as *adil*, or just. Tuchman (1972) has shown that the presentation of conflicting possibilities is one of the components of what American journalists mean when they say that a story is 'objective'. This news norm is widely recognized in both Indonesia and Malaysia, where it is generally referred to (in English) as 'covering both sides'. Yet for many Indonesian journalists, attaining balance is problematic. For example, Herry Nurdi, the editor of the Islamic magazine *Sabili*, which has been described as 'sensational', 'provocative', and prone to offering 'Zionist-crusader conspiracy theor[ies]' (Lim, 2005: 23), has wrestled with the criticism that his magazine is not balanced (Muhammad, 2001). 'When Pak Atma [of the Dr Soetomo Press Institute] says that *Sabili* isn't balanced, that it's conservative and puritan, we truly think about what we should do,' he said. 'We aren't angry, we truly consider it.'

Although Herry said that he sees the values of Islam and the values of journalism as complementary, especially in the realms of verification and covering both sides, most neutral observers would agree with the criticism that *Sabili* is not balanced. When presented with this critique, Herry said:

Now, most media, they don't have any sources other than the police when they are covering the issue of terrorism. So they aren't balanced. For example if *Tempo* does an independent investigation, all of its information comes from Detachment 88 [the special Indonesian police unit assigned to investigate terrorism]. So *Sabili* plays the role of dissenting opinion. What isn't said by the police, or by other sources, we will say. Now ideally, it shouldn't be like that. *Sabili* can't play that role forever. It should be in the center, choosing facts. But there has to be balance.

On the surface, Herry's point seems to be that balance can occur at the level of the individual story, the publication, or the media as a whole. Yet on a deeper level, he also suggests that balance does not necessarily equal justice. Former *Tempo* editor Goenawan Mohamad made a similar point when he described the difficulty of being balanced in a system that is inherently unjust.

There was one incident I remember from early on. It was when *Tempo* was in Senen. The law editor reported a story, something very evenhanded. But then the side of the weak was overshadowed, simply because he was weak. And I discovered that being even was not enough. And we had a debate about it, whether we should be so impartial, so even, when the victims are very weak. And we changed the story. We killed that story. And so I think from then on we decided that being even was not enough. Because before the philosophy had been to cover both sides. And we discovered it was not so easy. (Quoted in Steele, 2005: 23)

### *Independence from power*

As Khiabany (2006) has argued, 'Islamic' media must be viewed within local political and economic contexts, and the development of journalism in post-colonial Indonesia and Malaysia has been marked by struggles against authoritarianism. Most of the senior journalists working in Indonesia came of age under Soeharto's 'New Order' regime (Hill, 1994). In Malaysia too, legal restrictions on the press (Brown, 2005) as well as patterns of ownership (Gomez, 2004) make it extremely difficult for media to assert their independence (Steele, 2009). In this restrictive atmosphere, Islam has provided one of the few legitimate means of challenging authoritarianism.

Nearly all of the Indonesian journalists I interviewed had been involved either formally or informally with Islamic student organizations as undergraduates. For example, senior *Tempo* editor Arif Zulkifli was part of the Islamic student movement at the University of Indonesia that eventually became PKS, or the Prosperous Justice Party. Ahmad Taufik, also at *Tempo*, was a Muslim student activist, and, upon graduating, worked as a journalist for an Islamic cultural magazine called *Kiblat*.<sup>14</sup> Bina Bektiati spoke for many of her colleagues when she explained:

... at *Tempo*, most of us learned values from our friends and at the campus mosque. This was very influential in our thinking at that time, because it was the Soeharto era, and the mosque was seen as a place to discuss politics.<sup>15</sup>

The situation in Malaysia today is quite similar to that of Indonesia during the Soeharto years. *Malaysiakini's* Fathi Aris Omar was deeply involved with Islamic student associations in Malaysia at the University Teknologi MARA in the late 1980s.<sup>16</sup> Having founded, written for, or edited an array of Islamic publications (now mostly either defunct or banned), Fathi experienced injustice first-hand when his plans to study abroad were dashed for political reasons. He had been enrolled in a college of preparatory studies, a special program for bright young people who hoped to study overseas. 'But the government switched the program,' he explained, 'to reduce sending many Muslim people, because one of the political realities is that those who went overseas then normally become critical against the government and joined the opposition PAS.'

In 1999, Fathi became involved with the *reformasi* movement in support of Anwar Ibrahim not so much because of his sympathy for Anwar as a leader but rather because of the feeling that the former deputy prime minister had been treated unjustly. He recalled that engaging with other young activists, and learning more about democracy, human rights, and freedom of expression caused him to see things differently. In words that are strikingly similar to those used by both Arif and Taufik in Indonesia, he said that he had

learned that truth did not occupy one particular space. 'I think there is an important difference between Islam and political Islam,' he added, 'between Islam as a religion, and Islam as a political ideal.'

One of the most powerful statements of the relationship between Islamic values and the journalistic imperative of serving as an independent monitor of power came from Toriq Hadad, now the chief editor of *Tempo* magazine. Toriq is of Arab descent, and grew up in Pasuruan, East Java, where his grandfather was a well-known businessman. His uncle, Ismid Hadad, was one of the founders of the staunchly anti-Communist newspaper *Harian Kami*. Toriq's father worked in Saudi Arabia, so Toriq was raised in his grandfather's house, which he described in this way:

I was raised in a family that is very religious. My grandfather, if there was a person who read the Qur'an and was wrong, he would very politely correct him. Our family was one that would never ever have a member that would be investigated by the police or brought to court because of corruption. Never. The values of our religion that were taught to us were to treat other people justly, and to try to look for things that would be useful to others.<sup>17</sup>

Both Toriq's father and uncle knew Goenawan Mohamad and Fikri Jufri, the founders of *Tempo* magazine. Toriq grew up reading *Tempo*, which Fikri Jufri sent him from Jakarta. Even at the time, Toriq remembers, he thought of the magazine as something that was in keeping with his own view because it 'doesn't take sides'. As Toriq said:

In Islam, an *ulama* [religious scholar] has the most difficult of all duties because he cannot associate with people who are close to power. An *ulama* is the person who must control power. And *Tempo* is a magazine that would often point out if a *kyai* [religious teacher and scholar] was playing with power.

Toriq added that he knew, perhaps subconsciously, that this was the right path, 'to speak for justice without siding with power. Power needs limits. Power must be reined in.'

Implicit in Toriq's view is the notion that a publication that's truly Islamic cannot be controlled by political power, even an Islamic power. This idea was echoed by former *Malaysiakini.com* journalist Fauwaz Abdul Aziz, who said that when people asked him why he wrote for *Malaysiakini* rather than *Harrakah*, the publication of the Pan-Malaysia Islamic Party PAS, his answer was that 'it's a party organ'. Because it belongs to PAS, he explained, it's 'politicized'.<sup>18</sup>

Kamali cites numerous examples from the Qur'an and Hadith of the importance of speaking truth to power, including the Prophet's statement that 'the best form of Jihad is to tell a word of truth to an oppressive ruler' (2002: 23). Indonesian and Malaysian journalists frequently mention this passage – as well as the sayings of the first two Caliphs that the people should correct them if they deviated from the truth (Galandar, 2008) – to support their conviction that it is wrong to support a despot, even if that despot is nominally Muslim. Syu'bah Asa, a former *Tempo* journalist explained that even as editor of the Islamic magazine *Panji Masyarakat* he saw his job as defending Islamic values, not particular groups of Muslims. 'For me, Islamic organizations are not as important as Islamic values,' he said. Under Soeharto, Syu'bah added, Muslims had been treated unjustly. 'But if Muslims treat others unjustly, we criticize them, too.'<sup>19</sup>

## Justice: the paraideology

The struggle for economic justice and protection of the weak are not only fundamental to Islam (Aslan, 2006), they are also ‘enduring values’ in the practice of journalism in Indonesia and Malaysia (Steele, 2005, 2009). As Goenawan Mohamad once said, ‘it is very difficult in Indonesia if you don’t speak about justice. Indonesian history is the history of searching for justice, more than searching for freedom’ (quoted in Steele, 2005: 23). Toriq Hadad, the current chief editor of *Tempo*, likewise noted that ‘the mission of *Tempo* is justice’ (Steele, 2005: 23).

Muslims are far more motivated by the goal of justice than they are by freedom. In Islam, rulers and subjects alike are bound by certain obligations towards one another. In the case of the ruled, these obligations include obedience to those in authority. Yet the authority of rulers is not unlimited. If those in authority violate the law, or if their rule is ‘illegitimate or unjust’, they may forfeit their claim to obedience (Lewis, 1988: 91–2). This concept of justice and its relationship to the legitimacy of those in authority is central to Muslim journalists’ understanding of their role in society. Amarzan Loebis, a senior *Tempo* editor, said:

... the Prophet is a person who sends a message. And I try to be a journalist who sends a message to other people. The message is what? To remind, and to have a critical attitude. So if there is something that is done that is wrong by another person, or by an institution, or by the government, we have to show it.<sup>20</sup>

Scholars have argued that in Islam, ‘forbidding wrong’ is paramount, and that Muslims have an obligation to stop evil when they see it (Cook, 2003). In the Hadith, or secondary body of material that is also believed to be revealed by God, the Prophet Muhammad is quoted as saying ‘Whoever sees a wrong, and is able to put it right ... with his hand, let him do so; if he can’t, then with his tongue; if he can’t then in his heart, and that is the bare minimum of faith’ (quoted in Cook, 2003: 4).

In Indonesia, the ‘watchdog’ role of the press is grounded in the obligation of Muslims to stop evil when they see it, and for much of Indonesian press history ‘evil’ was related to the political context of the New Order. For example, the injustice of a political system in which there were virtually no limits to the government’s authority led *Tempo* magazine writers to lend subtle support to ordinary people in their struggle against the overwhelming power of the state. A content analysis of nearly 25 years of the national section of *Tempo* (Steele, 2005) revealed a disproportionate number of stories with ‘victims’ as the main actors. A 2007 analysis of newspaper accounts of what has come to be known as ‘Lumpur Lapindo’ or the Indonesian mud volcano produced similar results.

On 29 May 2006, a mixture of hot mud and ash began to gush out of an exploratory oil well in Porong, Indonesia. Both the company that owns the well (P.T. Lapindo Brantas) and the firm that was doing the drilling are partly owned by the family firm of Aburizal Bakrie, one of Indonesia’s most powerful individuals. With millions of tons of mud already flooding the regency, more than 16,000 residents displaced from their homes, farms and factories ruined, key transportation arteries affected, and no realistic plans in place to stop the flow, the scale of the disaster is immense.

Close reading of the Jakarta dailies *The Jakarta Post*, *Kompas*, and *Tempo* newspaper, as well as *Surya* daily in Surabaya suggests that most of the stories focused either on government activities, or the suffering of the victims.<sup>21</sup> There were very few stories in any of these papers that reported on the process of governance, investigated how this disaster was allowed to occur in the first place, or retraced the steps taken by P.T. Lapindo Brantas in the early days when the flow of mud might have been stopped. Instead, the majority of stories about government activity focused on elite politics, and insinuated that there must be some kind of secret deal between Aburizal Bakrie and Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono – presumably in order to strengthen the President’s chances of being re-elected in 2009.

The overwhelming preference in Indonesian journalism for stories that emphasize either the suffering of the victims or possible wrongdoing by political elites is grounded in a specific set of journalistic values based on justice and the obligation of each individual to promote what is good and prevent what is evil, or *amar makruf nahi munkar*. Tutug Pamorkaton, the *Surya* journalist who bears primary responsibility for covering Lapindo, said that he feels satisfied with the stories he writes when he knows that he has put down exactly what he has observed in the field – when he has discovered the truth. He also feels good when he has defended the people.<sup>22</sup>

One story of which Tutug is especially proud is his profile of a man named Waras, a 56-year-old victim of the mudflow who was mistakenly given Rp. 400,000,000 (approximately \$44,000) in compensation money. Tutug describes Waras as a simple farmer who only finished fifth grade, who works the rice fields he shares with his brother. Waras ‘doesn’t talk much’ – unless the topic is planting padi. Yet Waras returned the money, thus doing what was right and honorable. Tutug wrote:

The company officials’ eyes were wide with astonishment at the honest attitude of Waras. In the midst of those who used all sorts of methods to make excessive claims about the size of their land and buildings, here was a man like Waras. It was even more amazing if you saw his day-to-day situation, which was far from what could be called adequate. (*Surya*, 2007: 12)

It is possible to see the way in which *Surya* has been covering Lapindo – with its emphasis on the suffering of the victims and the highlighting of those like Waras who do what is right – as an example of inviting what is good. Similarly *The Jakarta Post*’s and *Tempo*’s emphasis on the possibility of collusion between Aburizal Bakrie and the President can be seen as an effort to stop wrongdoing. As Cook has suggested in his discussion of forbidding wrong in Islam, our anger at wrongdoers and our sympathy for victims ‘are two sides of the same emotional coin’ (2003: 165).

The goal of Indonesian journalists to expose corruption among political elites in the case of the mud volcano is thus the same as that of western ‘watchdog journalism’ – but the means of getting there is different. Indonesian Muslim journalists – even those who work for secular news organizations like *Surya* – have internalized the teaching of commanding right and forbidding wrong in such a way that it unconsciously governs how they view their obligations as journalists, just as their American counterparts have internalized a different understanding of the rights of journalists as guardians of the liberties of the people.

How do Indonesian journalists justify their work to themselves? Even those who work for what might be considered secular media explain the *meaning* of journalism in terms that are largely Islamic. *Tempo*'s Arif Zulkifli, who was involved in the student missionary or *dakwah* movement in the 1980s, said that he does not see his current work as a journalist as a kind of *dakwah*. Yet Arif also said that he now finds meaning in exposing wrongdoing so that the people can do something about it. Despite Arif's insistence that Islamic values have nothing to do with journalism, religion suffuses his explanation of the significance of his work.

I believe that I'm in this world to gather goodness. I have to do lots of good things, or 'invite good and forbid evil' so that later, when I die, it won't all have been for nothing. I believe in life after death. I believe that each person will be held accountable. I am perhaps not a good Muslim in terms of having a ritual; I am not perfect in that regard. But I believe that what I write, what I report, what I have done for *Tempo* are good things that I can be proud of after I die.<sup>23</sup>

Not all Indonesian journalists agree that the values of Islam infuse the values of journalism in Indonesia. Goenawan Mohamad, for example, is skeptical, arguing the values of journalism are universal. He agrees, however, that, just as Islam was understood and accepted in a local idiom in Southeast Asia, so too are the values of journalism. It's about 'justification,' he concedes. 'When you talk about Islam, it's about justification.' Yet this is precisely the point. As Goenawan says, Indonesian journalists justify their work in Islamic terms because it's their 'language' and 'treasure of values'.

So [they] can be very at peace, peaceful with that. It's only how do you justify to yourself what you are doing? And people use religion, Islam, and in that sense, yes, Islam can be very useful. That's not because Islam inspired them. Islam is the language to justify what you believe in journalism.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion: the role of independent media in a just society

A few years ago, I gave a series of talks on doing good journalism at the Bernama news agency in Malaysia. After the formal lecture, a group of young journalists asked how they could practice good journalism in a society in which there was so much government control. In response, I offered the example of *Tempo*, and told them what journalist and intellectual Arief Budiman had said years ago when I was working on my book:

In Islam we have this kind of saying. If you see something bad happening, you have to stop it with your hands. If you cannot stop it with your hands, stop it with your mouth. If you cannot stop it with your mouth, stop it with your heart.

Arif went on to conclude that 'different people have different capacities', and 'we don't want to always ask people to do something with their hands ... But at least we want people to stop with their heart. That means they are not betraying their conscience.'<sup>25</sup>

I was astonished at how much Arif's comments resonated. Of course as I later learned, this was not just a 'saying', but rather a teaching that is essential to Islam. Related to the commandment to enjoin good and forbid evil, it is the cardinal principle by which

citizens are entitled to ‘forbid, whether in words, acts, or silent denunciation, any evil which they see being committed’ (Kamali, 2002: 28). For journalists, who live by the word, the applications are obvious.<sup>26</sup>

Programs focusing on ‘the role of a free press in a democracy’ have long been part of the basic repertoire of the US Department of State’s public diplomacy efforts. Yet the notion of press freedom does not resonate in the majority Muslim societies of Indonesia and Malaysia in the same way that it does in the West. How, they say, can an American talk about either press freedom or democracy when your own media has been so subservient to US government interests? As *Tempo*’s Toriq Hadad said, ‘press freedom, this is a western definition’. Referring to a newspaper that is affiliated with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s [SBY’s] Democratic party, he added:

*Journal Nasional* is very free, they can write about anything! But if they want to write about SBY what is possible? They are free to write anything about SBY, but they are only going to write what is good. Indeed, they are not independent in the matter of SBY.<sup>27</sup>

If the American government wants to reach journalists in Islamic Southeast Asia, rather than focusing on ‘the role of a free press in a democracy’, it would make far more sense to focus on ‘the role of independent media in a just society’. Muslim journalists in Indonesia and Malaysia may not be moved by the goal of freedom, but they understand the importance of speaking truth to power, and of stopping what is wrong with your words. The modern history of both Indonesia and Malaysia suggests that without independent media, justice is no more possible than either freedom or democracy. If Goenawan is right that the ‘treasure’ of Indonesian journalists is the language of Islam, then the USA should consider using the local idiom to reach them.

## Notes

- 1 About 25 interviews were conducted in Jakarta, Surabaya, and Kuala Lumpur during 2008–2009. Most were conducted in Indonesian or Malaysian, and lasted about two hours. After a few prefatory remarks about my interest in the ideology of journalism and the teachings of Islam, I asked a series of questions that focused on the respondents’ views of their day-to-day work as journalists, and whether they saw it as being in any way related to religion. These questions included: (1) Why did you become a journalist? (2) What is the purpose of journalism? (3) What do you see as the significance of your work? (4) Which stories meant the most to you?
- 2 Atmakusumah, 28 August 2009.
- 3 Fathi Aris Omar, 16 July 2009.
- 4 Yusi Pareanom, 23 July 2009.
- 5 Dhimam Abror, 6 June 2009.
- 6 Haidar Bagir, 5 September 2009.
- 7 Fauwaz Abdul Aziz, 22 December 2008.
- 8 Bambang Harymurti, 2 September 2009.
- 9 Herry Nurdi, 31 August 2009.
- 10 ‘O believers, if an ungodly man comes to you with a tiding, make clear, lest you afflict a people unwittingly, and then repent of what you have done’ (Arberry, 1996: 230).
- 11 Noor Huda Ismail, 26 August 2009.

- 12 From *Encyclopedia Britannica* online. Available at: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/296158/isnad>
- 13 Bambang Harymurti, 21 January 2000.
- 14 Ahmad Taufik, 23 July 2009.
- 15 Bina Bektiati, 23 July 2009.
- 16 Fathi Aris Omar, 16 July 2009.
- 17 Toriq Hadad, 5 June 2009.
- 18 Fauwaz Abdul Aziz, 11 August 2007.
- 19 Syu'bah Asa, 2 August 2000.
- 20 Amaran Loebis, 26 May 2009.
- 21 A six-month sample of stories from *Surya* between January and June 2007 showed that 42 percent of the 37 stories published had mudflow victims as the main actors. A sample of *Jakarta Post* stories from the same period showed that 20 percent of the stories featured victims as the main actors, and 52 percent featured the President, the Vice President, members of Parliament (local and national), or other government officials as the main actor.
- 22 Tutug Pamorkaton, 29 May 2008.
- 23 Arif Zulkifli, May 28 2009.
- 24 Goenawan Mohamad, 23 September 2009.
- 25 Arief Budiman, 6 December 1999.
- 26 Dhimam Abror said that when he is typing his weekly essays he sometimes thinks about setting things right with his hands, 29 May 2008.
- 27 Toriq Hadad, 5 June 2009.

## References

- Anam FK (2009) *Fikih Jurnalistik: Etika & Kebebasan Pers Menurut Islam* [Journalistic law: Press freedom and ethics according to Islam]. Jakarta: Pustaka Al-Kautsar.
- Arberry AJ (1996) *The Koran Interpreted: A Translation*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Armstrong K (2002) *Islam: A Short History*. New York: Random House, Modern Library Paperback Edition.
- Aslan R (2006) *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. London: Arrow Books.
- Bailyn B (1967) *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brown G (2005) The rough and rosy road: Sites of contestation in Malaysia's shackled media industry. *Pacific Affairs* 78(Spring): 39–56.
- Cook M (2003) *Forbidding Wrong in Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crouch H (1996) *Government and Society in Malaysia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Galandar M (2008) Communication in the early Muslim society. In: Hossain M (ed.) *Media and Muslim Society*. Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University, 45–71.
- Gans H (1979) *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*. New York: Pantheon.
- Gomez E (2004) Politics of the media business. In: Welsh B (ed.) *Reflections: The Mahathir Years*. Washington, DC: Southeast Asian Studies Program, SAIS.
- Hefner RW (1997) Islam in an era of nation-states: Politics and religious renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia. In: Hefner RW and Horvatich P (eds) *Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 3–40.
- Heng R (ed.) (2002) *Media Fortunes Changing Times: ASEAN States in Transition*. Singapore: ISEAS.
- Hill D (1994) *The Press in New Order Indonesia*. Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan.

- Jurusan Ilmu Komunikasi (2007) *Independent Study: Analisis Liputan Koran Tempo dan Majalah Tempo Terhadap Asian Agri Group Dan Lapindo* [Content, framing and discourse analysis]. Yogyakarta: Universitas Gadjah Mada.
- Kamali MH (2000) *Freedom of Expression in Islam*. Kuala Lumpur: Ilmiah Publishers.
- Kamali MH (2002) *Freedom, Equality and Justice in Islam*. Kuala Lumpur: Ilmiah Publishers.
- Khiabany G (2006) Religion and media in Iran: The imperative of the market and the straightjacket of Islamism. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 3(2): 3–21.
- LaMay C (2007) *Exporting Press Freedom*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Lerner D (2000[1958]) The passing of traditional society. Excerpted in Roberts JT and Hite A (2000) *From Modernization to Globalization: Perspectives on Development and Social Change*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 119–33.
- Keane W (2009) Freedom and blasphemy: On Indonesian press freedom and Danish cartoons. *Public Culture* 22 (1): 47–76.
- Kovach B and Rosenstiel T (2001) *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Levy L (1985) *The Emergence of a Free Press*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis B (1988) *The Political Language of Islam*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Liddle W (1996) *Leadership and Culture in Indonesian Politics*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Lim M (2005) *Islamic Radicalism and Anti-Americanism in Indonesia: The Role of the Internet*. Washington, DC: East-West Center Washington.
- McCargo D (2003) *Media and Politics in Pacific Asia*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Mahmood S (2009) Religious reason and secular affect: An incommensurable divide? *Critical Inquiry* 35(Summer): 836–62.
- Mowlana H (1993) The new global order and cultural ecology. *Media Culture & Society* 15: 9–27.
- Mowlana H (2003) Foundation of communication in Islamic societies. In: Mitchell JP and Marriage S (eds) *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion, and Culture*. London: T&T Clark, 305–15.
- Muhammad A (2001) Jihad Lewat Tulisan [Jihad in writing]. *Pantau*, July.
- Nasr S (2002) *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Pintak L and Ginges J (2008) The mission of Arab journalism: Creating change in a time of turmoil. *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 1(3): 193–227.
- Reid A (1993) *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce: 1450–1680. Vol. II: Expansion and Crisis*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Romano A (2003) *Politics and the Press in Indonesia: Understanding an Evolving Political Culture*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Steele J (2005) *Wars Within: The Story of Tempo, an Independent Magazine in Soeharto's Indonesia*. Jakarta and Singapore: Equinox Publishing and ISEAS.
- Steele J (2009) Professionalism online: How Malaysiakini challenges authoritarianism. *International Journal of Press/Politics* 14(January): 91–111.
- Surya* (2007) Petani Lugu Yang Tolak Uang Rp 400 Juta [A simple farmer refuses 400 million rupiah]. 19 August, p. 12.
- Tarrant B (2008) *Reporting Indonesia: The Jakarta Post Story 1983–2008*. Jakarta: Equinox.
- Tempo* (2007) Kisah si Pembobol [A whistleblower's tale]. 21 January, p. 96.
- Tuchman G (1972) Objectivity as strategic ritual: An examination of Newsmen's notions of objectivity. *American Journal of Sociology* 77(January): 660–79.

**Biographical note**

Janet Steele is an Associate Professor of Journalism at the School of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University. She received her PhD in history from the Johns Hopkins University, and is interested in how culture is communicated through the mass media. Her most recent book *Wars Within: The Story of Tempo, an Independent Magazine in Soeharto's Indonesia* focuses on *Tempo* magazine and its relationship to the politics and culture of New Order Indonesia. She is a frequent visitor to Southeast Asia, and writes a weekly newspaper column called 'Email from America' for *Surya* daily in Surabaya, East Java.