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Book review: Culture And Politics: Issues In Australian Journalism On Indonesia, 1975-1993

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Review Essay by MARTIN HIRST

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Culture and Politics is a timely reminder of the delicate nature of the Australian news media's relationship with the Indonesian regime and that so-called "cultural sensitivities" are really no more than political expediency (inter alia p.149). Indonesian journalists, as well as those visiting from Australia, are subject to harsh criticism when it suits the Jakarta government. Even worse, local journalists are banned, or have their publications closed down, if they transgress the tough written and unwritten rules of behaviour. As Kingsbury notes, for their sins (real and imagined) several Australian journalists have been expelled from Indonesia over the past 15 years. We're also reminded that in 1975 six Australian reporters were murdered by Indonesian soldiers when they tried to cover the invasion of East Timor.

It's a pity that this study ends in 1993 at a time, Kingsbury suggests, when the Jakarta regime was beginning to soften its line on the Australian media and when Australian journalists began to "self-censor" their reporting (p. 88). It's a pity because in the first few months of 1998 the Australian media has covered Indonesia widely as the process of political and economic "meltdown" in the archipelago intensifies.

Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, has visited Jakarta to assure the Indonesian leadership of Australia's continuing support for the "New Order" and for reform of the economy. Through February and March 1998 Downer also visited Washington in a successful attempt to persuade the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to back Soeharto and ease its hard line against the President's family (Woodford 1998: 1, 11). On 7 April 1998, Prime Minister Howard announced an immediate grant of A\$461 million (\$US300m) to help Jakarta maintain economic stability (McDonald 1998: 8). The same day the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that "hard-liners" in the Soeharto government were considering a "shoot on sight" policy against demonstrators

and looters (Jenkins 1998:1)

Following Soeharto's March 1998 re-election for another seven year term and the appointment of the controversial technology minister Habibie as his heir-apparent, (now President) deteriorating economic conditions have led to food and "race riots"; activists have emerged onto Indonesian campuses and the military police are just as quickly making them disappear again. Indonesia's geographic proximity to Australia and the magnitude of the crisis make the story an important one and, based on Kingsbury's analysis of the period to 1993, this leads me to a series of casual observations about the Australian news media coverage of recent events there.

Coincidence #1: Almost 12 years to the day (10 April 1986) since the publication of the now infamous "Soeharto billions" story the Sydney Morning Herald is at it again. This time it's not David Jenkins, but the headline is very similar: "*How to make money, and friends in Jakarta*", and once again the SMH is documenting the vast wealth and influence of the Soeharto family and the "cronies" who've gathered around its power (Wilkinson & Bui 1998: 1).

Coincidence #2: On 11 April 1998 the SMH covered the release of a report by the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade that described the federal government's closure of a *Radio Australia* transmitting facility near Darwin as "farical" and "incomprehensible" (Clark 1998: 11). Kingsbury's chapter on RA records its importance to Indonesians starved of reliable local information and the annoyance Indonesian language broadcasts caused to the Jakarta government. He also notes that a change of editorial policy at RA in 1989 has led to a less critical style of coverage in the Indonesia service (p. 83).

Coincidence #3: In the six months between publication of *Culture and Politics* (September 1997) and the writing of this review (April 1998), news from Indonesia has rarely been off the front pages of Australia's broadsheet newspapers. The facts of the crisis brewing to Australia's north cannot have escaped even the most casual observers of daily journalism. On one day alone in early April the SMH (6 April 1998) devoted 60 column-centimetres on the front page to Indonesian coverage and continued the story for another 135 column-centimetres inside, plus photographs over a further 60.

The front page of the business section also had a story about Indonesian banks closing, a story with very little news value to Australian readers, except perhaps the "continuity" (p. 62) of the Indonesia story. The next day the coverage was just as extensive. Coincidence? I don't think so. Recent and ongoing social and economic problems in Indonesia have led to an increased "frequency" (p. 62) of coverage in the Australian media. Why is

this story so often on the front page at the moment? I would suggest it's because of a convergence between Indonesian and Australian "national" interests (more accurately between the political and economic elites in both nations). As Kingsbury notes, Australian investment in Indonesia has continued its steady growth, despite sometimes poor political relations (p. 31).

Certainly a number of Australian business figures seem to understand that Australian and Indonesian national interests converge with their own "rights" to make money out of deals done with members, and close supporters, of Soeharto's family. As Australian advertising entrepreneur Michael Nettlefold told the Sydney Morning Herald on 6 April 1998: "[He] believes that the Soeharto children get an unfair press [in Australia] and insists there are cultural differences between Australia and Indonesia that explain why the children have the access [to business deals] that they do." (Wilkinson & Bui 1998: 8).

It is this alleged clash of journalistic cultures that Kingsbury documents and explains in *Culture and Politics*. But he also argues, and I agree, that the cultural sensitivity of the Jakarta elite is no more than convenience, masking an authoritarian political culture (inter alia, p. vii). Kingsbury's argument centres on the essential cultural and political differences between Indonesian and Australian journalism. In the Indonesian context journalism is expected to play a "developmental" role, supporting the official *Pancasila* ideology of the nation-state. In Australia the media is ostensibly "free" as its cultural and civic values are derived from the politics of liberal democracy and the traditions of the Enlightenment (Hartley 1996).

However, as Kingsbury notes, since 1993 Australian journalists have themselves engaged in "self-censorship" in order to secure a more permanent presence in Jakarta and lessen the risk of upsetting the Indonesian leadership with critical or embarrassing coverage. My criticism is that this is really only a surface view. The unquestioned assumptions of liberal democracy, in particular the sanctity of "market forces", work to mask the actual "developmental" nature of Australian journalism. The ideological factor common to both Indonesian and Australian journalism is support for the "national interest".

This "market forces" ideology is clearly expressed in Kingsbury's work, but so is the contradiction into which it finally forces his arguments. In relation to the media and journalism the myth goes as follows -- the working through of market forces (supply and demand) ensures that the media produces what the audience wants, that is the content of newspapers and bulletins conforms to what the reader/listener/viewer expects and wants from a news service.

In Kingsbury's monograph these ideas are articulated in chapter seven, "*Media, Messages and Power*", where he writes: "[The media] must continue to correspond with audience requirements and expectations. (They are also influenced by the audiences' pre-existing normative values and those which continue to be informed by non(news media sources of information". (p. 67).

However, I would argue that the culture of journalism (in both Australia and Indonesia) and the news values associated with it are determined by the relations of journalistic production, rather than by "giving the audience what it wants". The limited framing of the news around a set of core ideological values (what Daniel Hallin calls the "sphere of consensus" (Hallin 1994) is very much in place before news gets to the audience. Kingsbury appears to implicitly acknowledge this (at least in relation to the electronic media) when he writes that television, "further reconstructs in the minds of the audience conceptions of what constitutes the interesting, the relevant and the important" (p. 73).

But in my view the same arguments can be made about the print media too. The selection, treatment and placement of stories are all done before the paper or magazine hits the newsagents. The only "choice" open to readers is to read or ignore the articles presented; one cannot replace a page with other stories to "customise" a newspaper any more than one can "deselect" items from a radio or television bulletin. It is also the reason why the Indonesian elite can ignore what's in the Australian tabloids. Papers like the *Daily Telegraph* in Sydney are pitched at a working class audience and contain little analysis of the situation in Indonesia, but the broadsheet press speaks to the influential in Australia (those who might pressure the Australian government and business elites) and are therefore of more interest in Jakarta.

After exhaustive research of media coverage in the period 1975 to 1993, Kingsbury concludes that if Australian policy towards Jakarta continues to be one of "appeasement", it will indicate that as a nation we have abandoned a universalist approach to human rights in favour of "differing sets of values for Indonesian and Australian citizens [which] necessarily proceed from a relativist approach to cultural understanding" (p. 149). He rightly notes that ipressure remains for Australia and its news media to significantly alter their reporting of Indonesia to accommodate the linked demands of "national interest" that operate as strongly in Canberra as they do in Jakarta.

The drastic downsizing of Radio Australia is evidence enough of the Australian government's willingness to continue this softly-softly approach to Indonesian "cultural sensibilities". It is indeed a pity if Kingsbury's right that Australian journalists are going along with this by curbing their own tongues.

It is only by continuing to offer sharp criticism, where necessary, of both its own and the Indonesian government that the Australian media can play an honest and effective role in helping Australians "to realistically assess the status of [Australia's] bilateral relationship with Indonesia upon which it so clearly intends to build its Asian future" (p. 150). This is particularly important in the current political climate since Soeharto relinquished the Presidency to Habibie. ■

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