

**Steve Sharp. *Journalism and Conflict in Indonesia: From Reporting Violence to Promoting Peace*. New York, NY: Routledge 2013. 255 pp.**

Janet Steele

This first book by Steve Sharp, a former journalist and media and journalism educator, attempts to do quite a number of things, many of them very well. An examination of how two Jakarta dailies, *Kompas* and *Republika*, dealt with the cultural dimensions of the “full-scale communal war in the Maluku Province,” the book advances the hypothesis that “media workers—far from being disinterested purveyors of unproblematic truths—are implicated in the creation and spread of ideas and images that shape the political discourses that exacerbate violent conflict” (p. 2).

This hypothesis, while not especially controversial, is quite interesting to consider in light of the violent conflict in Maluku that began in January 1999, and by March 2001 had killed as many as nine thousand people. The first five chapters of the book provide the theoretical background necessary to understand Sharp’s hypothesis, mostly consisting of admirably detailed reviews of various published academic resources. Sharp’s work draws upon communication theory as well as insights from history, political science, and sociology to provide discussions of the role of media narratives in covering conflict, the history of Indonesian press culture, the history of Indonesia’s center–periphery relations and the frequently resulting violence, and the ways in which cultural identities, especially those labeled “primordialist,” have formed a basis for political mobilization. These first chapters, though useful, take up a large portion of the book, and perhaps reflect the origins of the work as a doctoral dissertation. Only one of the book’s seven chapters is actually devoted to media coverage of the conflict, and it is surprisingly limited in scope, focusing on the analysis of selected stories from *Kompas* and *Republika*. A final chapter offers suggestions as to how professional journalistic practices might be changed to assist in the creation of a media environment that does not aid in the escalation of conflict.

*Kompas* was in many ways the New Order newspaper *par excellence*, operating easily within the constraints of government restrictions, and downplaying the religious affiliations of its Catholic-owned publishing group (p. 57). *Republika*, on the other hand, was founded in 1993 by ICMI (Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia, the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals), under the chairmanship of then-Minister of Research and Technology B. J. Habibie, with the express purpose of serving the Muslim community. In 1999, after B. J. Habibie was defeated in the presidential election, *Republika* floundered. In 2000, when Mahaka Media bought *Republika*, CEO Erick Thorir promised that *Republika* would continue to serve the Muslim community, but on a commercial basis. Surprisingly, Stark fails to note this change in ownership, and how it might have affected coverage of the conflict in Maluku.

On the first page of the introduction, Stark notes how today, more than ten years after the war in Maluku subsided, there is still no agreement among analysts as to how the conflict should be represented, adding, “if analysts still disagree, it is perhaps unfair to expect the news media in the chaotic interregnum of the late 1990s to have achieved an easy consensus” (p. 1). This is an essential point. One might ask if the scholars he so diligently analyzes are unable to agree on the source or meaning of the conflict in either North or South Maluku, is it even reasonable to expect that journalists

working at the time would have been able to do anything other than draw upon tropes created in the New Order?

Chapter six, "Framing Religious Conflict: Primordialism Writ Large" (pp. 157–74), suggests that the answer to this rhetorical question is a resounding "no." In his analysis of stories published in *Kompas* and *Republika* between July 1999 and June 2000, Stark notes that both papers displayed "a lack of continuity in news narratives over time" (p. 157). Both papers relied too much on descriptive accounts, official statements from military and civilian sources, and commentary from talking heads in Jakarta—commentary that invariably lacked context.

There were a few notable differences in the two papers. *Kompas* was more likely to rely on official statements, and *Republika* was more likely to relay the views of Muslim leaders, although in both papers the views of these "observers" were presented without context, leading to a reading experience that Stark nicely describes as "a festival of opinion" (p. 158). Content analysis suggests that both papers described combatants with euphemisms and highly sanitized language, without identifying them as either Christian or Muslim. *Kompas* demonstrated this strategy to avoid labels to a higher degree than did *Republika*.

Each of these findings is unsurprising, given the overall state of Indonesian journalism in 1999–2000. During these very early days of *reformasi*, Indonesian news organizations were still grappling with the realities of overcoming the mindset that accompanied thirty-two years of authoritarian rule, and dropping the evasive strategies that had been required to keep safe and continue publication. A conflict like the war in Maluku would have been impossible to report on honestly, and old habits die hard. Indonesia's infamous SARA (acronym formed from *suku*, ethnicity; *agama*, religion; *ras*, race; and *antar golongan*, intergroup) law, which prohibited reporting on any conflict involving ethnicity, religion, race, or intergroup conflict, is especially pertinent here. According to the 1982 Press Law No. 21, "Press publications have to be kept safe from matters that will hurt the public ... for example, stories that would generate ethnic, religious, racial, or inter-group conflict."<sup>1</sup> This was widely interpreted to mean that the press could not report openly on religious clashes, church burnings, race riots, labor unrest, or separatist movements.

During the New Order period, *Kompas*, especially, was known for what editor Rosihan Anwar famously called *jurnalisme kepiting*, or "crab-like" journalism, in which reporters and editors avoided reporting directly on topics that were controversial.<sup>2</sup> My own content analysis of the national section of *Tempo* magazine during this same period revealed that *Tempo* reporters vastly preferred statements from public officials and reconstructions of timelines or chronologies to anything resembling analysis.<sup>3</sup> To expect journalists to break these decades-old habits overnight is asking a lot. And even today, Indonesian reporters and editors often suggest that reporting on inter-religious

<sup>1</sup>See Penjelasan atas Undang-undang Republik Indonesia No. 21 Tahun 1982 Tentang Perubahan atas Undang-undang Nomor 11 Tahun 1966 tentang Ketentuan-ketentuan Pokok Pers, Indonesia Media Law and Policy Center. This is a translation of the explanation accompanying the 1982 changes to the 1966 press law.

<sup>2</sup>Penerbit Buku Kompas, *Kompas Menulis Dari Dalam* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2007), p. 31.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Janet Steele, "Representations of 'The Nation' in *TEMPO* Magazine," *Indonesia* 76 (October 2003), pp. 127–45.

or ethnic violence “just makes the situation worse.”<sup>4</sup> Given Sharp’s experience as a journalist and media trainer, his book seems oddly detached from the day-to-day realities faced by Indonesian journalists.

In his final chapter, Sharp proposes both a revival of development communication and the implementation of a new ethical paradigm that is often referred to as “peace journalism.” Based on the work of Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung, who coined the term in the 1970s, peace journalism was picked up by British television war correspondents Annabel McGoldrick and Jake Lynch, who brought the concept to Indonesia. In general, peace journalism distinguishes between two modes of reporting: war or violence journalism, and peace or conflict journalism. According to the advocates of peace journalism, war or violence journalism reports on conflict as a zero-sum game, and coverage is victory-oriented and inclined to take sides. In comparison, peace or conflict journalism does the opposite by exploring the background of conflicts, giving voice to all sides, and focusing on the creativity of conflict resolution as well as peace-making and peace-keeping efforts (pp. 191–93).

In fact, peace journalism became something of a fad in Indonesia after 2000, with workshops sponsored by the British Council and the NGO Internews, among others. It was also embraced by many local journalists’ organizations, such as LSPP (Lembaga Studi Pers dan Pembangunan, Institute for Press Development and Studies) and the Media Watch group in Surabaya. Although McGoldrick and Lynch are quick to point out that real solutions to conflict can only be found through honest and accurate reporting, this does not seem to be the way that peace journalism was interpreted in Indonesia, where the concept was both vague enough to be almost meaningless (e.g., journalism that will result in peace), and very similar to the New Order understanding of good journalism as something that is not likely to promote horizontal conflict. It is hardly surprising that when *Kompas* editor Jakob Oetomo was awarded an honorary doctoral degree from the University of Gadjah Mada in 2003, he was credited with having been a pioneer of peace journalism. *Kompas*’s desire to steer clear of reports that are likely to stir up inter-group conflict is well-known.

Sharp’s book does make a significant contribution, tying together the scholarly literature of communication studies with the work of analysts from other disciplines who have struggled to make sense of what happened in Maluku in 1999–2001. One is left, however, wishing that he had spent less time reviewing the literature and more on focusing on the journalism itself.

---

<sup>4</sup> Personal communications with me during the sixteen years that I have conducted trainings for news organizations in Indonesia.