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**A jellybean journalist in Surabaya:  
Writing for the English language media in Indonesia**

**Duncan Graham**

The vehicle I use in Indonesia is a tiny bright green city car, frugal on fuel and nippy for squeezing through narrow alleys and dodging motorbikes. I think the jellybean is ideal for the job – but it has some serious drawbacks. It can be easily squashed – literally and metaphorically.

Foreigners in status-conscious Java are supposed to use a Mercedes, BMW or Peugeot – the blacker the better - and they should definitely have a driver. Otherwise they have no credibility and another purpose – probably to spy or Christianise poor Muslims. Xenophobia is alive and well in Indonesia.

So is distrust. An unaccompanied Westerner claiming to be writing for the respected *The Jakarta Post* and driving a joke car is certainly suspect, particularly with government officials and Chinese business tycoons. Being asked: ‘Where’s your secretary and driver?’ isn’t the best way to start any interview.

I live in Surabaya, Indonesia’s second biggest city and the capital of East Java. It’s a sprawling, chaotic and polluted port and a major industrial zone. Imagine stomping a cockroach on a tile floor. That seems to have been the template for planning.

The Jawa Pos newspaper group dominates the city. This includes a TV station *JTV* and *Memorandum*, a yellow-presser thriving on a formula of lukewarm sex, gory crime and mysticism, and *Nyata* which is Indonesia’s *Woman’s Day*.

The *Jawa Pos* is much like any middle market Australian paper with sections on celebrities, fashion, sport and advice on relationships and health – allowing for some eroticism under the guise of education. The writing is often turgid and by Australian standards padded with irrelevancies – but it mixes Javanese and slang in its stories making it part of the community. Its claimed daily circulation is around 300,000 in a province of 36 million people. That’s close to *The West Australian’s* Saturday sales in a state of just two million.

The superbly-designed national daily *Kompas*, which allegedly sells little more than half a million across the nation, is disliked by many in East Java because it uses high level Indonesian and is considered too serious.

The *Jawa Pos* has been extraordinarily successful since the fall of Suharto and the scrapping of controls restricting reporting, advertising and printing. Local inserts have made the paper widely acceptable. When East Java newsmakers think of print journalism their model is the *Jawa Pos*.

Before former president Gus Dur closed the Department of Information there were 292 print publications. That number rapidly jumped to more than 2,000 before a shakeout. Around 830 have survived.

According to Leo Batubara, a member of the Indonesian Press Council, about 7 million papers are sold nationally every day. He also claimed that most papers reported the same news and that there was little to choose between them

This boom has caught the industry short of quality journalists. The typical local reporter is young, enthusiastic, scruffy, ill-informed, badly educated and poorly trained. Men dominate. They often hunt in packs and feed off each other so copy is frequently generic. The industry has attracted the idealistic who publish their own little mags - and fringe dwellers with dubious credentials. These people hope to pick up the envelopes that some newsmakers distribute to encourage positive coverage.

Young local journalists would be lucky to take home more than Rp 2 million (AUD 300) a month. *Kompas* and *The Jakarta Post* pay higher but about one fifth of the Australian rate.

To their credit sections of the industry are trying to purge envelope journalism and lift education levels. *The Jakarta Post*, which is linked to *Kompas* and the Gramedia publishing group through shareholdings, bans journalists from accepting handouts and demands ethical standards from its reporters.

The paper also organises regular training programs for its staff. I've been privileged to have assisted at three of these sessions conducted at a hillside villa owned by *Tempo* magazine, which also holds shares in *The Jakarta Post*.

I've worked with senior editors from *The Jakarta Post* and the RMIT on an AusAID training program to lift standards among reporters organised through the State-run *Antara* news agency. Courses have been held in Kupang, Mataram, Surabaya and Makassar.

*The Jakarta Post* is run by PT Bina Media Tenggara, a private company owned by four competing publications. The other two are *Suara Karya* and *Sinar Harapan*. An employees' collective holds twenty per cent of the shares.

*Tempo* produces an English language cut-down version of its famous weekly with less than half the pages of the original. After a fall in quality earlier this year, the magazine has now picked up.

The other English language productions are the glossy lifestyle mags like *Jakarta Kini* that celebrate hedonism and are pitched at expats on obscenely high salaries with nothing better to do than vote on best bars and whine about the traffic. Most are edited by native speakers listed as 'technical advisors' to comply with government regulations on foreign workers. They're supposed to be passing their skills onto local replacements but the process seems to be taking a long time.

The international titles like *Cosmo* and *Forbes*, and which are published under licence, are in Indonesian – often with English headlines, making a bizarre mix.

Overall the language in *The Jakarta Post* is high standard and occasionally lively. Factual and grammatical errors are rare. The writing tends to be straight, bordering on the safe and boring – particularly in the Op-Ed pages where space is often taken by pontificating minor academics. Of almost 100 editorial staff only 11 are expats and include Australians, British, Americans and Japanese.

The staff write in English. However copy from regional stringers comes in Indonesian and has to be translated. This adds enormously to the job of producing accurate reports from correspondents of diverse skills and backgrounds and with little understanding of the readership.

Editor Endy Bayuni formerly worked for Reuters; his secondary and tertiary education was in England and he's studied in the US on a fellowship. He's aware most readers have accessed the Internet or watched satellite TV newscasts long before the paper is delivered, and are across the hard news stories. Consequently he wants *The Jakarta Post* to be a writer's paper, a 'viewpaper' like the *International Herald Tribune*.

A worthy ambition that's going to require a change in mindset by many staffers. Writing factual and often parochial reports to a formula and churning these out daily is quite different from using these as the base for creative interpretation – a task that takes time, resources and experience.

Nationalism is robust in Indonesia and no-one wants a paper produced by expats whingeing about Indonesia's huge problems rather than locals analysing them. The problem is matching the top salaries the really clever English-language Indonesian writers can command in multi-national companies or with foreign news agencies.

*The Jakarta Post* tends to be liberal, critical of the Suharto regime, anti-corruption, interested in the arts and supportive of a pluralist society. There's a strong emphasis on business and the economy. Human rights issues are usually given a good run. The paper takes shots at the government and other institutions in the style of Australian papers, but seldom applies the robust language we're used to.

*The Jakarta Post* can often get away with comments and pictures that Indonesian language papers with a wider and less exclusive circulation wouldn't dare try lest the mob's wrath is aroused. Smashing up the office of a publication you don't like and threatening the staff is still a standard way of protesting, as the publishers of *Playboy* know well.

Whatever the faults, the press in Indonesia has a real lusty heartbeat. It certainly doesn't elsewhere in South-East Asia. Newspapers in Singapore and Malaysia are muted mouthpieces for the governments.

There are links between *The Jakarta Post* and the Department of Foreign Affairs. Two previous editors have been recruited as ambassadors; the present editor's father was in the diplomatic service and staffers from the department have attended training courses run by the paper.

*The Jakarta Post* journalists I've met are extraordinarily able so it's not surprising some are poached. I think they'd outshine many Australian reporters and be a credit to any newsroom.

It's one thing to speak in a foreign language – much higher skills are required for writing on a daily basis, particularly when the job demands wide usage of Western idioms and a deep knowledge of alien cultures, ancient and modern.

*The Jakarta Post's* readers don't fit into any neat mono-cultural category. Surveys show around half are members of the Indonesian elite. The rest are expats from almost every country in the world whose only common link is a language that's usually their second or third tongue. Indonesian is not a popular world language, so the Japanese, Koreans, Europeans, Indians and Chinese who work in Indonesia read *The Jakarta Post*.

How does a Muslim reporter cope with the everyday English idioms and references based on the Bible, and the literary allusions we've inherited from the great English writers? Does anything fit together if you haven't studied Shakespeare or read Hemingway? How can you really understand the West when you don't share a common cultural memory?

When I added to a story about controversial dangdut singer Inul Daratista the line: 'Don't put your daughter on the stage, Mrs Worthington' it didn't resonate with everyone. A senior editor from the paper who has studied in the US certainly wanted an explanation – but was happy with another writer's use of 'mad dogs and Englishmen' despite not knowing of Noel Coward.

How does an Indonesian journalist who's never lived in the West make sense of the understatements of the reserved British, the overstatements of the brash Americans and the iconoclasm of cynical Australians – and all against a deadline? The best do, and that's a rare and admirable skill.

*The Jakarta Post* started in 1983 with technical help from *The West Australian*. Most days it has 24 pages so it's a quick read, particularly as advertising is expanding and many stories are ho-hum regional reports. Banks, airlines, property developers, international schools and up-market stores use its pages to reach the so-called A-class readers.

The paper has been making a profit in the past two years despite having a circulation below 40,000 so it's no surprise that there's now a rival, curiously titled *The Point*, inviting the obvious retort: What's the point? At the moment it's only going to embassies and has yet to appear on news-stands.

Thailand, which has a quarter of Indonesia's 240 million population, supports two English language papers.

Distribution problems plague *The Jakarta Post*. Outside key newsagents in Jakarta, Kuta and the five-star hotels, the paper is almost impossible to find. To ensure a copy you have to subscribe. But deliveries in the regional centres are late and haphazard – a serious problem for a daily newspaper.

A larger readership may be there but it has yet to be reached. Even if the marketing problems could be solved it's unlikely the paper would take a monster leap in circulation. Indonesians are not great readers and seldom buy papers in whatever language, preferring to get their news from radio, TV and street-corner gossip. One survey claims 88 per cent watch TV, only 17 per cent read newspapers.

Although *The Jakarta Post* has a reputation for promptly correcting errors and defending its staff, as an outsider I'm extremely vulnerable. Any offended Indonesian who is powerful enough could easily arrange for Immigration to run a visa check. This would probably find flaws though none exist. That's happened to other Australians.

Alternatively for less than \$100 they could get a mob to trash my house. Like my jellybean car, all foreigners in Indonesia are squashable. Tolerance doesn't mean acceptance.

Many prominent and regular newsmakers understand English but are reluctant to use their skills with a native speaker. The ultra nationalists often refuse to use English. In East Java the tongue of choice is Javanese.

Getting an interviewee's thoughts down without ambiguity is difficult enough in any language and particularly so with the hierarchal Javanese who have a reputation for saying anything but what they really mean. Hazards abound.

Curiously the people most nervous about my writing have been expats who come from countries with a free press tradition. The only person who changed his mind about cooperating after all the work had been done was an Australian academic working for a US aid agency.

Perhaps the expats' nervousness is understandable. Those on lucrative contracts tend to live in gated communities surrounded by other Westerners whose duties include making personal 'security assessments' every time they go out.

Served by regular travel warnings from their embassies and constantly trading horror stories over their sundowners it's not surprising they're so easily spooked. For them the fundamentalists are forever poring over the media seeking insults to be avenged, clipping names for a victim list.

The US and Japanese consulates in Surabaya add to the paranoia. These are high tech forts with round-the-clock police guards plus scores of their own security personnel. Their bags are already packed so they can flee in a moment. The Americans claim they're in town to improve communication links with Indonesians – but Americans don't understand irony.

**By contrast the French consulate is constantly open to the public and has no guards. It's the site of intellectual discussion, classical concerts, exhibitions and arthouse films. In Indonesia the French are fearless – we are not.**

**There's now no official Australian presence in Surabaya – and perhaps it's just as well. Under current thinking it would be yet another bunker sending the same message as the Americans and Japanese: We fear you greatly and trust you not at all.**

**Indonesians who are well travelled use me to complain furiously and in detail about the visa restrictions on visiting Australia. As these people often want to buy property, get medical treatment and educate their kids in our country the onerous restrictions are a real thorn.**

**The Australian Embassy in Jakarta denies this clear and common truth and flaunts figures saying most applicants are successful. It has no statistics on those who have Australia as their first choice but are deterred by the complexities and obstacles - so choose another more welcoming country for their study, medical care, investment and retirement.**

**I do get plenty of banter, and not always good-natured, about Australia as the deputy sheriff of South East Asia, being George Bush's lackey, planning pre-emptive strikes and having plans to break up the Unitary State.**

**With apologies to Mr Downer and others who claim such sentiments have passed their use-by date – sorry, folks: The view from the penthouse suites enjoyed by the fly-in, fly-out politicians may seem rosy but the people I meet don't believe a word of our bland assurances however many treaties are signed.**

**I'm not going to be a mouthpiece for the Australian government. I don't support its policies on Indonesia, apart from the generous aid donations and some fine but limited programs designed to improve teaching and good governance. The post grad scholarships are great – but our offerings miniscule: Under 700 for a population of 240 million.**

**For a safe future I desperately want to see closer ties between our two countries at all levels and I don't think this should be done just through governments.**

**Regular exchange programs for journalists from both countries would be a great start. This has happened before on one-off projects but not on a continuous basis. *The Jakarta Post* occasionally takes interns from Australia and New Zealand – this could be formalised into a proper two-way exchange program to the benefit of both countries.**

**The ACICIS (Australian Consortium for 'In-Country' Indonesian Studies) is an excellent way for Australian undergraduates to study Indonesian language and culture; it needs to be enlarged greatly with equal numbers of Indonesians visiting Australia.**

**A few fine people of distinction, and the occasional creative artist pass through on goodwill tours – but make no impact in the kampongs. We need Nicole Kidman or some other locally-loved screen face to tell Indonesians that Australia is a friendly neighbour keen for contact and which means well - a separate, independent country free from US control and which seriously wants to build up a solid, long-lasting relationship.**

**But then I don't think it is.**

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