

Media and Identity Conference, Curtin University Perth:

Using Identity in Journalism History: Australian Foreign Correspondents in Indonesia

At its best, Journalism History describes the changing practices and social expectations of journalists and explains how these affect the process of reporting. This paper will show how the identity of the journalist is essential to this history, arguing that previous literature in Journalism History has found studying the identity of reporters problematic. Literature describing the role of individual journalists has led to hagiographies and the mythical perception of journalists as larrikins or crusaders. As a result, a 'backlash' occurred in Journalism History, with scholars becoming sceptical of examining the identity of various journalists, resulting in the journalist not having a voice in the literature whatsoever. This paper will argue that by identifying the Australian journalists in Indonesia, we can better explain the role specific foreign correspondents play in our understanding of Indonesia as a historical process. This is possible because until recently only a select few resident Australian correspondents have reported from Indonesia at any one time. Identity is a crucial aspect in the way a reporter operates, and by historically examining five Australian correspondents operating from Indonesia through their analysis of themselves, we can show how their style of reporting differs due to their identity.

This said, identity is a term not easily defined. Taking into account Barker's argument that no single identity can act as an overarching organising identity, rather, that we are constituted by fractured multiple identities.¹ For the purposes of this paper we shall see identity along similar lines to how Giddens states, 'the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography'. 'An identity project builds

¹ Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, Sage Publications, 2000, p166.

on what we think we are now in the light of our past and present circumstances.’² Thus, through personal interviews with five Australian journalists, we can examine how they reflect on their own identity when they were reporting from Indonesia, and how this affected how they operated. In sum, identity is about sameness and difference, about the personal and the social, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others.³ This ‘sameness and difference’ in identity is what shall be examined here with regards to Australian journalists in Indonesia. In historically examining the workings of Australian journalists an important aspect of this research is examining the person behind the story, and to argue that identity is an important aspect of Journalism History.

Journalism Identity as hagiographies:

More than any other discipline, history has made the greatest attempt to study the identity of journalists and their role in bringing news to Australians. The danger of writing about the identity of foreign correspondents is they can become hagiographies or glorified biographies. Australia set precedents for writing about heroic journalists – Banjo Paterson, W.C Bean, Morrison of Peking, and even Wilfred Burchett. Much of the literature in Journalism History that studies the identity of journalists creates a mythical perception of their subject. Journalists are portrayed as part of this all-important Fourth Estate, striving towards objectivity and truth in the face of extraordinary deceit, danger and destruction. Foreign correspondents are described as legendary beings who ventured to far-away lands, overcoming difficult terrain and mystifying societies to somehow make sense of it all at home. Philip Knightley, one

² Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*, Cambridge, Polity, 1991, 53

³ Jeffrey Weeks, *Against Nature: essays on history, sexuality and identity*, London, Rivers Oram Press, Paul and Co., 1991, p89.

of the most famed scholars in Journalism History, describes this as the journalist being the 'hero and myth maker'.⁴ This myth can also be ascribed to the fact that many authors who write about the identity of journalists are either current journalists or former ones. They are trained in writing what interests the reader, and writing the best possible story, rather than rigorous academic study and thorough research. As Fred Inglis writes in *People's Witness: The Journalist in Modern Politics*, 'Largely, I have looked for and found tall, exemplary tales of brave journalists, fine writers, high steppers, good lives: and a few satisfactorily bad ones thrown in, to lend colour.'⁵ Peter Sekulus wrote in his preface to *A Handful of Hacks*, 'This book's aim is to enable those interested in the media at whatever level to learn about the pride of a previous and quite extraordinary generation of journalists.'⁶ John Hohenberg's title *The Great Reporters and Their Times*,⁷ is further evidence, but perhaps one of the most famous works that perhaps contributed to this 'hero and myth-maker' literature is Tim Bowden's biography of Neil Davis, *One Crowded Hour*.⁸ Bowden obtained most of his material from letters from Davis, and the result is some fascinating oral history. It was so effective it inspired a novel by Christopher Koch, *Highways to a War*.⁹ However, one could certainly argue that *One Crowded Hour*, while full of detail and impressive stories, adds to the myth of journalists as heroic characters. Vine writes, 'Every profession has its myth that defines its self-identity and work culture. For Australian journalism, it is that of the hard-working, hard drinking,

⁴ Philip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as hero and myth maker from the Crimea to Kosovo*, London, Prion Books Ltd, 2000.

⁵ Fred Inglis, *The People's Witness: The Journalist in Modern Politics*, Yale University Press, 2002, p6.

⁶ Peter Sekulus, *A Handful of Hacks*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1999, p3.

⁷ Joh Hohenberg, *Foreign Correspondence: The Great Reporters and their Times*, Syracuse, New York, 1995,

⁸ Tim Bowden, *One Crowded Hour, Neil Davis Combat Cameraman 1934-1985*, Collins, Australia, 1987.

⁹ C.J. Koch, *Highways to a War*, Port Melbourne, Minerva, 1996.

aggressive and defiant “lovable larrikin”.’¹⁰ In reality, much of the journalist’s time is spent writing mindless copy for unappreciative editors, reading notes, office duties, and chasing up interviews. Journalists are reluctant to write about these aspects in their autobiographies, nor are historians effective in detailing these aspects of the reporting process. Thus, this is the gap between empirical reality and the journalist as constructed here. The reason that one dominates the other is Journalism Historians are dominated by former journalists who are more likely to glorify the profession, and because journalists are trained to tell the best story, so Journalism Historians ask their subject to comment on the most dangerous aspect of their work, or the most important story they had to cover, ignoring this empirical reality of Journalism History.

‘Backlash’ to identity of journalists

These problems inherent in the ‘hero and myth maker’ literature of journalists led to a ‘backlash’ by scholars to not identify with the journalist at all. These scholars believe that the best studies and histories of Journalism can only come through extensive data, statistics and surveys. By increasing the number of journalists in the study there is no room for individual comments from them, which nullifies their ability to tell a story, or in harsher terms, bend the truth. The ‘truth’ for these scholars lie in the statistics and compiling of data. One of the first scholars to do this was Theodore Kruglak,¹¹ who surveyed 277 journalists, asking them a range of questions, but questions which hardly required thoughtful or extensive replies. The result is a ‘statistical analysis’ compiled by the author. Interesting conclusions are drawn from this, but without room for interpretation. An example of this method is Stephen Hess’ chapter, *Who Are the*

¹⁰ Josie Vine, ‘Who is the Lovable Larrikin? An Historical Inquiry using Biography and Autobiography’, *When Journalism Meets History: Refereed papers from the Australian Media Traditions Conference*, RMIT, 2004, p1-8.

¹¹ Theodore Kruglak, *The Foreign Correspondents: A Study of the men and women reporting for the American information media in Western Europe*, Librairie d. droz. Geneva, 1955,

Foreign Correspondents? '82% are college graduates', meaning that 'journalism has become if not an elite profession, a profession attractive to elites.'¹² Susan Ford and Elizabeth Burrows, *Journalism History, The Faces of the News, Now and Then: An Historical Profile of Journalist in Australia and Overseas*, is mainly a study of data collected by researchers of journalists. These researchers argue that larger numbers of journalists surveyed is essential, and any survey less than 1000 respondents is not a true reflection of the field. The result, of course, is a complete lack of identity of the individual journalist. Too great a number of respondents leaves no room in the interview process for elaboration by the interviewee. Another way of writing Journalism History without identity and thus avoiding the 'hero and myth-maker' literature is to look only at the final results published or broadcast. Jim Lederman in *The American Media and the Intifada*. analysed 800 nightly newscasts, more than 2000 dispatches from wire services, and 1500 print articles. Lederman explains this method describing the importance of avoiding the identity of journalists, 'I have used few quotes from journalists in this book because once I began my archival research in depth, I discovered that there was an enormous gap between what most of my interviewees said they had done or had intended to do and what I actually found in the public record.'¹³ Thus, it has become common for scholars claiming to be taking a more rigorous approach to journalism studies to avoid comments from the journalist, for fear of being part of this 'hero and myth maker' literature. The statistical approach radically de-personalises journalism as practice, treating journalists more as mechanical ciphers than historically situated, politically and culturally aware discursive agents. This paper will argue that studying the identity of the journalist is

¹² Stephen Hess, *International News and Foreign Correspondents*, Washington Dc; Brooking Institution, 1996.

¹³ Jim Lederman, *Battle Lines: The American Media and the Intifada*, New York, Holt, 1992, p13.

indeed an important aspect of Journalism History, and that in this research the voice of the journalist can play a useful role in identifying how they saw themselves, and how their identity shaped the way they report.

Using identity in Journalism History :

This research is part of a bigger project entitled ‘A History of Australian Journalism in Indonesia’, in which one aspect of this research will be examining how the identity of Australian foreign correspondent to Indonesia has changed over time. Considering the conjecture in studying identity in Journalism History described above, this paper will attempt to show that by looking at Australian correspondents in Indonesia, we will highlight the importance of examining the identity of journalists in scholarly literature. It will examine five journalists, all with different backgrounds and lifestyles, and describe how their identity leads to a different style of reporting.

The first ever Western correspondent to enter Indonesia was Australian Tony Rafty,¹⁴ a WWII soldier who became a cartoonist and reported on Indonesia’s Independence. Rafty arrived in Indonesia and literally ‘knocked on the palace door and asked to speak to Sukarno’. His love of art that he shared with Sukarno led to him being welcomed into Sukarno’s private domain. Rafty said, ‘Sukarno took me round the palace and got to know the artwork I did. After that the bond between us became much stronger.’ Rafty considered Sukarno a friend, and his relationship with Sukarno led to him being able to travel freely around Indonesia with an official escort and a personal bodyguard assigned to him. Other Australian correspondents in Indonesia during this time, such as Ian Flemming and Nigel Palethorpe, did not have this same connection with Sukarno, and thus their ability to travel around Indonesia, and report from there, was much more difficult. This stresses the importance of identity when

¹⁴ All quotes from personal interview 6/6/06

asking how it was Rafty was able to operate much easier and for longer in Indonesia in the late 1940's, while other journalists, such as Flemming and Palethorpe, found themselves locked in a jail cell, stranded until Rafty, with his connections to Sukarno, could personally free them. Rafty's love of art was something that Sukarno could identify with, and it became a relationship that no other journalist at the time had.

Charlotte Meramas¹⁵ was another journalist whose personality led her to have a good relationship with Sukarno, albeit as not as close as Rafty. Meramas said, 'If he knew you were a married woman and didn't want to play, he gave you the utmost respect. I found him a gentleman with me.' Meramas married an Indonesian politician, and became the first woman Australian journalist in Indonesia in 1957, writing for the *Indonesian Observer*. Meramas' connections with the Indonesian elite were important sources for her, and she had a natural ability to mix in these circles. Her connections with the cocktail party circuit meant her stories became dominated with official sources and a good ability to paraphrase 'off the record' statements.

Meramas said,

'Cocktail parties very important and the best way to know. All the diplomats would send me flowers and chocolates to butter me up.' Meramas, being a young female reporter meant she was received differently to Rafty for example, but the fact she was married would have meant she would be more accepted in Indonesia than an unmarried female journalist. However, a female Australian asking for interviews did raise some eyebrows, 'They thought I was rather unique, but I was determined to get through that,' she said. Meramas' identity is important because she was amongst the first group of pioneer Australian women journalists to operate in Asia, and the cross cultural tension caused by an identity understood as active, qualified, professional

¹⁵ All quotes from personal interview 16/6/06

female who has a right to perform this role. This is in contrast to the predominant Indonesian belief at the time of woman as more passive and dependent than males.

Perhaps on the opposite end of the scale, a very different personality to Meramas was the young male bachelor, ABC correspondent in 1967-70, Mike Carlton.¹⁶ When he first arrived, Carlton had his 21st birthday in Jakarta. On the surface, Carlton exemplifies the typical personification of Australian journalists to Asia – young, bachelor, thrown in the deep end with not much experience, and a true ‘larrikin’, as was described earlier by Vine. But there is more to this ‘larrikin’ persona. Carlton described the difficulties of the first year in Jakarta, ‘I knew almost nothing, I knew a bit about reporting but I knew almost nothing about Indonesia. I’d done a lot of reading, and I’d worked in Asia, but it was an enormous learning curve. I shudder to think now how ignorant I was.’ Despite this inexperience, Carlton believed he became accustomed to life in Indonesia as a correspondent, ‘I didn’t like it for the first year because I was out of my depth and was struggling, but afterwards I came to love it. I was young, unmarried, lived in a handsome bungalow with servants, and had my shirts washed and ironed.’ While it is important to examine the constraints and influences on journalists, it is also important to explain how they operate despite personal difficulties and the fact that they find it difficult to identify with Indonesia initially, as Carlton said, ‘The energy of youth carries you a long way.’ We can draw from Carlton’s self-assessment a tension in his understanding of himself as supposedly professional, competent, but actually struggling and a privilege which he enjoyed but was conscious of as in some way undeserved.

¹⁶ All quotes from personal interview 17/6/06

The self-confessed difficulties in reporting are also part of how 23 year-old Hamish McDonald describes his time in Indonesia.¹⁷ McDonald moved to Indonesia as a freelance journalist in 1974, taking his wife and two-year old. While Carlton's difficulties were one of inexperience with language, McDonald as a freelancer had many more practical difficulties that made the reporting process even tougher. McDonald describes his initial situation: 'It was extremely difficult. It was at the peak of the first oil boom so rents were extremely expensive in Jakarta, so we lived in a Kampung house for the first 18 months. We couldn't afford a telephone, so I had to use payphones in a hotel lobby, and of course no one could call me. We didn't have air conditioning, just enough electricity for lights, a fan, and a small fridge. I had a motorbike which was good except for the raining season where you would turn up to an interview soaking wet.' These difficulties due to McDonald not being set up by an agent led to further difficulties of reporting, as Indonesians did not see him as the typical Western correspondent they had been accustomed to, McDonald said, 'many Indonesians looked down on me because they were used to Westerners having the car, chauffer, servant, and arriving in crisp suits to an interview', these of course, were luxuries the freelance journalist could not afford. Reporting was difficult because there were expectations of who you should be that McDonald could not meet. Did this lead him to construct himself as different, or more flexible than, say Carlton? McDonald stresses the benefits to being a freelance journalist, he had more freedom to travel, and the cost of travel could be shared by his employers. 'I could travel a bit more easily in that I could get several of my outlooks to chip in a proportion of the costs so it wasn't a big burden for them to say yes.' McDonald and Carlton share similar personal experiences in initially reporting from Indonesia that are important

¹⁷ All quotes form personal interview 19/6/06

when examining Australian journalism in Indonesia as a historical process. However, despite their similarities in age and gender, it is important to stress that there are different types of journalists that report from Indonesia that affect the type of stories we receive in Australia. Carlton, the bachelor on an ABC salary who drank at the bars with his colleagues and lived in the same street as many government ministers in Menteng, Jakarta, paints a very different picture to McDonald, married with a small child, who freelanced and lived in a Kampung. McDonald had much more difficulty accessing the world of the Indonesian elite and cocktail parties than Carlton, yet found it easier to travel and report on stories other than straight hard news. These differences in lifestyles are an important spect of journalists identity and essential to the study of Journalism History.

The final journalist for examination is Louise Williams,¹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald* correspondent during the lead-up and fall of Suharto in the late 1990s. In this group, Williams is the only journalist who was a mother. Traditionally, the profession of journalism has been dominated by males, and it was, and even still is, rare to see a mother as a foreign correspondent. Williams said, ‘As the mother, you can’t go out at night, or socialise after work at the Foreign Correspondents Club. The mother being the primary breadwinner and correspondent is quite different from the bloke with the wife and kids in toe. You can’t function in the same way as other correspondents when you have kids, as every spare minute has to go to those kids.’ On the surface, this may seem that mothers as correspondents would find it difficult to operate due to the fact that they have so much more responsibility, but Williams also believes that there are other aspects to being a mother in terms of the reporting process, ‘I think being a mother connected me with Indonesian society in a way that a Westerner

¹⁸ All quotes from personal interview 26/6/06

wouldn't have been connected. We had a very good relationship with the families around us. The expectation upon women in Indonesia is to have children, so single women from the West were seen as a curiosity. On the street level a probably had an easier time because I was married with children. Quite different from being a young correspondent in the Philippines when I was only 24, and had long blonde hair to my waist.' One of the problems with the mythical perceptions of journalists as 'larrikins' is that it is an incredibly masculine identity. In the case of Louise Williams, it is clear that Australian foreign correspondents to Asia do not need to have this identity to operate effectively. Williams said, 'Socially there's not that many female correspondents with children, so I didn't drink with the boys in that sense. However, I would argue I had a great network of contact through my kids at the International School. We once went to the British Ambassador's house for a party and it wasn't me that was invited, it was my five year old! People underestimate that networking aspect.' Williams argues her identity changed once she became a mother, as she was much less wary of taking personal risks as a journalist once she had the responsibility of children. 'October 1999, the threatening of Australian journalists in particular meant my kids were freaked out about me dying in Timor.' Williams is conscious of her role and expectation of mother which is more important than her career. This philosophy would have endeared her to the Indonesian people, so in this sense, Williams' construct of herself as mother is similar to the Indonesian construct.

This paper has shed light on an aspect of Journalism History that is seldom examined, the question of how journalists construct their identity and sense of self. It is clear from this small examination that journalists as mythical figures or legendary heroes contrasts to how Australian correspondents in Indonesia saw themselves. It is also clear that these are different selves, that each journalists opinion of themselves is

extremely different. It is important to realise that the reports we receive back in Australia are written or broadcast by actual people. People who have personal experiences and situations much like us at home, and like us, their identity impacts on their work. Due to an honest assessment of their own identity, it is clear that these are journalists who have faults and limitations, and are ready to accept these retrospectively. The situations and identities described to here show how a the identity of a journalist, and differences in gender, personality, age and lifestyle, can lead to a different style of reporter and contrasting modus operandi. Thus, when writing Journalism History, it is inadequate to ignore the identity of the journalist and focus only on the reports that result, because in many ways the identity of the journalist has a lot to do with the end result. Further examination of these issues could lead to a better understanding of how identity leads to the type of articles from Indonesia. Journalism History at its best examines these issues, and explains how they evolve as a historical process.

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