

## Asia Pacific Media Educator

---

| Issue 7

Article 9

---

7-1999

### Friendship and objectivity: Pros and cons of foreign correspondents' adoption of the insiders' perspective

E. Hodge  
*Monash University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Hodge, E., Friendship and objectivity: Pros and cons of foreign correspondents' adoption of the insiders' perspective, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 7, 1999, 115-123.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss7/9>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

# Friendship And Objectivity: Pros And Cons Of Foreign Correspondents' Adoption Of The Insiders' Perspective

*Errol Hodge*

*Monash University, Australia*

My education and preparation to head the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation's* bureau in Indonesia in the late sixties and early seventies was thorough, but had a serious flaw that would have prejudiced the accuracy of my coverage of the biggest story to come out of Indonesia in recent years. The serious flaw I'll deal with later in this article. First I will outline of the program of education I undertook, with the support of the ABC.

With credit for some of the subjects from my generalist Bachelor of Arts from the University of Newcastle, I completed a BA with honours in Indonesian and Malayan Studies from the University of Sydney in the late 1960s, graduating in 1970. The honours course at Sydney University in those days included a thorough grounding in the history, sociology, literature and languages of the Indonesian archipelago and the Malayan peninsula. We learned about their pre-colonial history, colonial history, modern history, ethnic makeup, cultures, religions, literatures, *Bahasa Indonesia* (literally the Indonesian language) and *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay). Although we were taught spoken Indonesian and Malay, few of us became fluent. The emphasis was more on the ability to translate from written documents. We also acquired a reading knowledge of Dutch (some of the books about Indonesia had not been translated into Indonesian or English) and some of the source languages, Old Javanese, modern Javanese, Arabic and Sanskrit (the latter two with their beautiful and difficult scripts). An acquaintance with the Arabic script was essential, because much of what was written in Malay was not then transcribed into Romanised script.

Graduates of the RAAF School of Languages at Point Cook in Victoria were, according to one of them, Joe Coman (1981), later

©AsiaPacific  
MediaEducator  
Issue No.7  
July-December 1999

to become head of the Indonesian section at *Radio Australia*, “by far the most competent linguists in Australia”. The *Radio Australia* Officer in Indonesia during my term, Alan Morris, who gathered program material for *Radio Australia* and worked in a way as one of my assistant journalists, was certainly the most fluent foreign speaker of Indonesian among my colleagues. A disadvantage suffered by some who learned their Indonesian at Point Cook was the high proportion of military words in their vocabulary. But a year or two working in Indonesia, especially if, like Alan, they had Indonesian wives, ironed out this problem.

My predecessor as ABC bureau chief in Indonesia, Mike Carlton, now an on-air personality for Sydney radio station 2GB and columnist for the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper, has a remarkable talent for language. But he suffered from the disadvantage that he had learned his Indonesian from the street pedlars and prostitutes of Jakarta (as he frankly admitted). This meant that he was hesitant about speaking Indonesian to ministers and other highly placed government officials, for fear that an inappropriate word would slip into his conversation. My own Indonesian was formal and rather stilted, but at least there was no danger that I would use the Indonesian equivalent of English’s four-letter words.

I first went to Indonesia for three months as acting head of the ABC’s Jakarta bureau in late 1968 and early 1969, only three years after the coup that brought President Soeharto to power. At that stage, he was designated as Acting President, and Sukarno, though no longer the President for Life, was still designated as President. Some ill-informed foreigners, not realising the extent to which the old man’s power had been destroyed, thought he might eventually return to power, and Soeharto had missed his chance. Quite apart from not understanding the realities of power in Indonesia, they also misunderstood Javanese subtlety.

When I returned to Indonesia for a two-year appointment in 1970-71 as head of the ABC’s bureau in Jakarta, Soeharto’s power had been consolidated, and the foundations of the family fortune were being laid. Already, Mrs Tien Soeharto was widely being spoken of as “*Ibu Tien Per Sen*” (Mother Ten Per Cent), a reference to the commission she was reported to demand for her support for business ventures.

None of us foreign correspondents so much as alluded to Mrs Soeharto’s nickname or to the growing stories of corruption in high places. We were sure that to do so would have brought quick retribution – the closure of our offices and our expulsion from the country. We felt we could be more effective in reporting Indonesia to an Australian audience – and in my case to an Indonesian audience as well – if we exercised some self-censorship

and stayed in Indonesia. One of my tactful colleagues in the seventies was David Jenkins, then representing the *Melbourne Herald* and now the Asian Editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. David remarked later that his feeling at the time was that it was better to have three quarters of the pineapple than no pineapple at all (Jenkins 1987: 56). It was not until 1986 that he blurted out the first lady's nickname – and a lot more besides. His story of corruption among the Soeharto family and its friends was run on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Jenkins 1986: 1, 7). To make matters worse, a creative sub-editor gave it a banner headline comparing Soeharto with the disgraced President Marcos of the Philippines. The well-known result was that an Indonesian minister suddenly cancelled a visit to Australia, Jakarta downgraded its relations with Canberra, defence cooperation was curtailed, a plane-load of Australian tourists was turned back from Bali, and several Australian journalists, including Jenkins of course, were put on a list of those forbidden to receive visas.

Jenkins said in 1986 that foreign correspondents who wanted to remain in Indonesia were obliged to trim their sails to the Ministry of Information wind or face the consequences. Speaking from his experience in Jakarta in the early seventies, he said that, in particular, the foreign correspondents were “under more or less formal instructions” to avoid writing in any substantive way with three subjects:

- the position and business interests of the First Family;
- the role of the armed forces; and
- anything that might inflame ethnic or religious tensions, particularly matters touching on the position of the small but economically powerful Chinese community (Jenkins 1986: 58).

Jenkins continued by saying that the threat of expulsion was such that the correspondents would, in most cases, apply a form of self-censorship so extensive that few officials could reasonably complain. He described as “sensible and to the point” the advice of former foreign minister Bill Hayden, that in writing articles likely to offend, “journalists might want to consider their own self-interest and continued access to the country in question” (Jenkins 1986: 58).

Between 1991 and 1993, during his two-year term as head of the ABC's Jakarta bureau, Ian Macintosh claims to have covered all of what Jenkins called the “trilogy of taboo topics”, including the business interests of the Soeharto family, massacres in East Timor and the staunchly Muslim province of Aceh. I've devoted a chapter of my book, *Radio Wars*, to a content analysis of Macintosh's remarkably forthright reporting of the Dili massacre in November, 1991 (Hodge 1995: ch 10). The fact that he was able to get away with this and to cover the other “taboo topics” which

Jenkins and I in the early seventies were convinced would have led to our expulsion, raises the question of what had changed in the subsequent two decades.

Were Jenkins and I just pusillanimous, overestimating the expected consequences of stepping out of line? I don't believe we were, although I admit that I never tested the government's resolve by pushing it to the limit. I believe that, rather, there has been a slackening in the tight control of the foreign correspondents' corps that we believed existed in the early seventies. In 1995 Goenawan Mohamad, whose own *Tempo* magazine was closed for trespassing into the taboo trilogy, noted that the government was notably more tolerant of foreign correspondents than local journalists (pers. comm.).

My term as a foreign correspondent reinforced one thing I had learned about the Indonesians in my university studies – that they were a diverse collection of peoples, not a single race. I tried in my reporting to portray the differences in Indonesians of different ethnic groups. When fellow journalist Mike Willessee came to Indonesia with a television crew, I told him that during my time in Indonesia I hoped to help some Australians to appreciate that the most diverse Indonesians were more different than the most diverse Europeans. I said I hoped some Australians would one day understand that the Christian Bataks of north Sumatra and the Hindu-Balinese were more different in most respects than the Swedes and the Greeks. Or that the tribal people of Irian Jaya were more different from the strict Muslims of Aceh on the north-western tip of Sumatra than the Russians were from the Spaniards. His reply was succinct: "You're too ambitious, mate. First you'd have to convince Australians that Asians are not all the same!"

A huge advantage of heading the ABC's bureau in Indonesia was that *Radio Australia* was famous throughout the country. Most Indonesians had never heard of the ABC, whereas recognition of "*Radio Australi*" was widespread and instantaneous. In 1965, Indonesians had written a record 210,000 cards and letters to *Radio Australia* (Hasluck 1966), and the annual total in the early 1970s was almost as huge. My status as head of the ABC's bureau in Jakarta and the fact that I was the only Australian foreign correspondent who spoke the local language (Alan Morris was not officially a journalist) resulted in my election as Chairman of the Jakarta Foreign Correspondents' Club.

This helped me to make friends among some of Indonesia's leading journalists and gave me the advantage of getting to know some of Indonesia's leaders, including President Soeharto. Personally knowing Soeharto was helpful in my work, but was again the source of an unfortunate bias, in that I knew him as a

congenial, avuncular character rather than a corrupt dictator who had played a major part in the mass slaughter of communists and other leftists in 1965 and 1966, with a death toll of possibly half a million people or more.

The bloodbath of 1965-66 had been reported for Australian audiences by my predecessors. Their rather sanitised reporting – depicting it as a counter-coup that had saved our nearest Asian neighbour from communism – had satisfied most Australian diplomats and the government they represented, despite the fact, or perhaps because, it had understated the horror of the carnage that had taken place. I was given an insight into that horror by conversations I had with some who had taken part the killings, including some who recounted with great enthusiasm how they had machine-gunned those accused of being communists.

The story in which I pushed the limits farthest was in the persistent pressure which resulted in a visit by a group of foreign correspondents to the prison island of Buru in the Moluccas in 1971. The authorities were complaining that some of our stories about Buru gave the impression that it was a concentration camp, where communists and other leftists who had been supporters or sympathisers of the communist party were held in sub-human conditions. While they didn't portray Buru as a holiday camp, they told us the prisoners there were given a remarkable amount of freedom. As Foreign Correspondents' Club Chairman, I pressed them to give us a chance to report the situation on Buru in an objective way, rather than rely on second-hand reports. Finally, the pressure paid off, and it was agreed that a party of foreign correspondents would be flown to Buru to see for themselves.

Naturally, we indicated that we would want to interview some of Buru's most famous inmates, like the author Pramoedya Ananta Toer and the economist Professor Suprpto. I took along a tape recorder and interviewed them in both English and Indonesian. The result was enlightening. The fact that a guard insisted on being present at all the interviews conducted by me and my colleagues must certainly have had an intimidatory effect.

But, even so, Pramoedya in particular managed to give an idea of the conditions under which they lived. When I asked him whether he had enough food, he replied, "It is very hard to say."

Knowing that for him perhaps the greatest deprivation would be not to be able to write, I asked him whether he was allowed to write. The reply was the same: "It is very hard to say."

I asked him whether he had access to pencils and paper. Once again came the reply, "It is very hard to say." When I asked him if he was a communist, he gave the almost Biblical answer, "I am what I am" (Hodge 1971).

My interview with Pramoedya in English was broadcast

on the ABC, and those in both English and Indonesian on *Radio Australia*. The Indonesian authorities can't have been very pleased, but none of them ever complained to me. On the positive side, from the point of view of the Indonesian authorities, at least the audiences in Australia and Indonesia would have learned that the treatment of prisoners on Buru was less barbaric than in Japanese wartime prison camps. This visit must have made some impression on Pramoedya. In his prison diaries, published in Indonesian, Dutch and English, he refers to the interviews he gave to an Australian journalist.

Believing that my reporting from Indonesia should be balanced, I tried to tell the good news as well as the bad. I reported for the ABC's television audiences on some of Indonesia's economic progress. One of the projects that impressed me most was the development of Jakarta under the leadership of the Governor, General Ali Sadikin, who oversaw the construction of new housing in slum areas and projects to improve the living conditions of the people, including the piping of clean water. Late in my term, I took my television cameraman to Cilacap on Central Java's south coast where a port development program was being undertaken with Australian aid. The resulting film was good propaganda for the Australian government, of course, but it also gave the impression that after years of economic stagnation under Sukarno, significant developments were taking place.

An event I brought to Australian radio listeners and television viewers in 1970 was the death of Indonesia's first president. As far as I know, I was the only Westerner present as he was buried at his birthplace, the town of Blitar, near east Java's south coast. Jakarta's diplomats stayed away in droves, presumably not wanting to be associated with the discredited leader, and my colleagues in the foreign press corps seemed to think that coverage of the funeral of a man who had been under house arrest for years wasn't worth a journey to the other end of Java. Nevertheless, my reports of the huge, silent crowds who came to pay their respects possibly helped to show ABC viewers and listeners that although Sukarno was *persona non grata* with the government, the people he had led for 20 years had not forgotten him. My reports also demonstrated that the government which had held him prisoner for several years was feeling secure enough to let the people to pay tribute to him at his funeral and at the lying-in-state in Jakarta which had preceded it.

During my posting, my identification with the Indonesian peoples, resulting in part from my university studies and in part from the way I was able to move freely among the people of most of the 26 provinces, without the barriers of language, gave me a strong sympathy with them, with results that were not always

consistent with the need for journalists to distance themselves from the people with whom they associate. This sympathy created a pro-Indonesian bias in many of my reports, and would have led to a disastrously biased coverage of the invasion and annexation of East Timor in 1975 and 1975 if these events had occurred during my term as a foreign correspondent in Indonesia.

It is probably fortunate that I wasn't reporting from Indonesia during that period. I had always regarded East Timor as an integral part of the Indonesian archipelago which had not become part of the Republic simply because its colonial masters were the Portuguese and not the Dutch. It had seemed to me that it would be not just geographically neater, but also humanly logical, for East Timor eventually to become part of Indonesia. When the invasion took place in 1975, like Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser, I regarded it as the neatest solution to the civil war taking place in the former Portuguese colony. Probably if I had been the ABC's Jakarta correspondent at that time, my reporting would have shown the bias that in some ways was the outcome of my education in Indonesian studies and my sympathy for the Indonesian people.

As editor of *Radio Australia* in 1975 and 1976, I was horrified by brutal way the Indonesian military enforced the incorporation of East Timor, and the succession of atrocities that followed, showed me the error of my thinking. I still felt that, logically, East Timor should be part of Indonesia politically as well as geographically, but that the brutality of the Indonesian occupation was an unmitigated human tragedy. I felt that the solution would be for the military regime to be replaced by enlightened civilian authorities determined to rule for the benefit of the Timorese people. However, after many years of stubborn resistance by the Timorese people and oppression by the occupying military forces, I am convinced that the only humane solution to the problem was the creation of a new, independent mini-nation, despite its poverty in resources.

I tried hard to let my lifelong regard for reporting the truth about what was happening in East Timor not to be compromised by my sympathy for Indonesian claims for the territory. When the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Fretelin) began sending lengthy messages by radio to its supporters in Darwin, who sent them on by telex to the *Radio Australia* newsroom in Melbourne, I joined my subeditors in recognising them as a legitimate source of news. When the official government spokesman in Jakarta alleged that the broadcasts were pro-Fretelin (which they undoubtedly were), we continued to broadcast them, but I encouraged the ABC's Jakarta correspondent to cover the Indonesian and UDT (Timor Democratic Union) side of the story



from the border between East and West Timor.

In late 1975, the Australian Ambassador to Indonesia, Richard Woolcott, pressed to have *Radio Australia* moderate its coverage of the fighting in a way that would minimise offence to the Indonesian Government. I tried to have secret messages from Woolcott and his Department (and the Department's replies) declassified under Freedom of Information legislation. My attempts were rejected on the grounds that the documents were "of a particularly sensitive nature" (Smith 1989). The Department later told the Commonwealth Ombudsman that their disclosure would, or could reasonably be expected to, damage relations between Indonesia and Australia (Blessing 1989).

When the ABC's Jakarta correspondent, Warwick Beutler, criticised *Radio Australia's* use of unconfirmed news agency stories in the reporting of East Timor, I supported him. I directed that in future subeditors should check such reports with Beutler. But when in 1979 he agreed with the Australian ambassador that "invasion" was "an unnecessary word" to describe Indonesia's occupation of East Timor "at a time when Australia was doing everything it could to smooth out relations", I told him that his suggested use of "since East Timor became part of Indonesia" or "since East Timor was incorporated into Indonesia" would be going too far down the appeasement road.

A serious breach of journalistic integrity did occur in 1980, with the leak of classified American documents which mentioned, *inter alia*, the substance of a critical report from the new Australian ambassador, Tom Critchley, following a visit to East Timor in May. I backed the belief of senior members of *Radio Australia's* current affairs staff that it was a story that should be covered, not least because *Radio Australia's* credibility would suffer a serious blow if others covered it and we censored it. The full text of the resulting report was sent to the Department of Foreign Affairs, with an invitation to comment. Instead of accepting the invitation, the Department phoned senior ABC executives, complaining that the item was "unbalanced and negative". The Director of *Radio Australia*, Peter Barnett, over my objections, insisted that the studio introduction be changed to give the item a more "positive" emphasis. Barnett also overruled protests by juggling the order of items in the story in what seemed to me to be an illogical way (Hodge 1991: 117).

It now seems to me that too much learning about a country, its peoples and their traditions creates the potential danger that a foreign correspondent can identify so much with them that journalistic objectivity is lost. But education alone does not produce empathy, although I believe empathy may well be desirable. A journalist, even an educated one, must strive to retain his/her

journalistic objectivity regardless of how much is understood about the country or situation.

I still firmly believe in the thorough training of foreign correspondents in the language, history and cultures of the country or countries they aspire to report, and that they should strive for empathy with the peoples. But I am even more sure that it is essential for them to fiercely maintain the objectivity and scepticism that are among the hallmarks of good journalists no matter what kind of work they do.

## REFERENCES

- Blessing**, C.B. (1989), *Communication of C.B. Blessing*, Acting Senior Assistant Ombudsman to the author, 6 July 1989.
- Coman**, Joe (1981), *Correspondence to Geoff Ward, acting controller Radio Australia*, June 1981, Radio Australia Archives.
- Hasluck**, Paul (1966), *Correspondence to Alan Hulme*, February 22 1966, ABC Documentary Archives.
- Hodge**, Errol (1995), *Radio wars: Truth, propaganda and the struggle for Radio Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Hodge**, Errol (1991), 'The impact of the ABC on Australian-Indonesian relations since Timor', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 45 (1), 109-122.
- Hodge**, Errol (1971), Recorded interview with Pramoedya Ananta Toer.
- Jenkins**, David (1987), 'The Australian media and the region', *Australian Journalism Review*, 9 (1-2), 54-59.
- Jenkins**, David (1986), 'After Marcos, now for the Soeharto billions', *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 10, 1, 7.
- Jenkins**, David (1986), 'Indonesia: Government attitudes towards the domestic and foreign media', *Australian Outlook*, 40 (3), 153-161.
- Smith**, M.P.F. (1989), *Communication by M.P.F. Smith, Director, Parliamentary Liaison and FOI sub-section*, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, to the author.

---

*ERROL HODGE is head of Journalism at Monash University, Gippsland. He was Head of the ABC's Jakarta bureau, 1968-69 and 1970-71 and Editor of Radio Australia, 1978-85. Email: Errol.Hodge@arts.monash.edu.au*

---