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The Schapelle Corby Show: Drugs, Media and Society

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The Trials of Schapelle Corby

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The reality TV drama-The Schapelle Corby Story-has come to an end, thank heaven. In this, the highest rating Australian television drama of 2005, a young woman is tried by the Courts in Bali and found guilty of smuggling marijuana into Indonesia. Well before that judgment was made, the Australian media had already declared her innocent and a victim not just of a corrupt Indonesian judicial system, but also of 'criminal' (though unnamed and untried) airport baggage-handlers in Brisbane and Sydney. The Australian commercial television networks, in particular, also tried and found guilty the Indonesian judiciary and any Australian specialist who might dare say something not entirely negative about anything Indonesian. After the verdict was handed down on 27 May, the drama became increasingly muted and, apart from a few moments of interest in the 'legal team sacking' and 're-hiring' and the 'sentence reduction by high court' episodes, the popularity rating of the series has generally headed south.

"Our" Schapelle' was very much a creature of the television, with just a little bit of help from talk-back radio. But importantly, it was only after the breathless television show had been moved out of prime time that the broadsheet print media and Our' ABC seemed able to give some seriously thoughtful coverage to the issues. In the end, the TV channels had themselves been tried by 'serious' media and had been found wanting. But then, television-I am told-is 'medium': 'because it is neither rare, nor well-done'! (Shashi Tharoor, opening the 2004 Asian Media Summit in Kuala Lumpur.)

Thinking back over the story as it unfolded between 8 October 2004, when Corby was arrested, and 27 May 2005, when the verdict was delivered, several distinct dramatic episodes stand out for me.

The first interesting scene comes from the episode screened on 28 April, where Corby delivers her emotional plea to the judges. I first heard about it on 'your ABC' (and mine). The in-court reporter stated that the plea had been heard in English without the provision of Indonesian translation. Most mainstream media reporting assumed that the judges would not have been able to comprehend the language of the plea, and reported that one of the judges was, in fact, not listening at all, but reading a book. I and, by the sound of their reaction, the listeners of talk-back radio were appalled. A woman's life was at stake and the judge was reading a book! More was revealed on the SBS 9 p.m. news. As per the pattern of the day, the reporter talked about the reading judge and then... the camera panned on to the volume he was holding, showing part of the title: pidana seumur hidup (life sentencing). Clearly, the judge had not been reading a Mills and Boons novel.

If we had known that the judge was consulting something relevant to the case, we might have felt less outraged. I don't think for a minute that this was deliberately selective reporting. It is just that our reporters and photographers, and our newsrooms were not aware of what the judge was reading-not because they could not get close enough, but because they could not read Indonesian. And by reporting that which they could report, in a factually correct manner, but in a tone of voice which carried outrage, they added to the image of a heartless judiciary-precisely at the moment when Schapelle's trembling voice was saying: 'My life is in your hands, but I hope I am in your hearts'.

Could this peculiar form of inadequate reporting be prevented if more Australian reporters and photographers spoke or read Indonesian? Possibly. However, had the Australian mainstream media been less linguistically challenged, they would probably have told us also that the Indonesian media had dubbed Corby the Ratu Ganja (Queen of Ganja) long before the judges had delivered their verdict—a story hardly likely to convince Australian readers about the fairness of the Indonesian system.

The most striking difference between the two national media throughout the drama was that the Australian media was constantly quoted in Indonesia, but there was very little reference to the Indonesian media in the Australian one. While Jakarta Post, Indonesia's best-known English language newspaper, was selectively cited in the Australian media, there was nothing like the extensive, on the whole correct, and at times almost fascinated, Indonesian coverage of how the Australian media was telling the story of Corby.

Most educated Indonesian journalists and editors, certainly those working in the metropolitan media, have a working knowledge of English. And yes, we should be teaching more languages, particularly more Asian languages, to Australians. But there is more at stake than just the relative knowledge of each other's language—the question of how we deal with political and cultural distance per se.

Difference and change

Throughout the period of the New Order (1965-98), and indeed perhaps since the establishment of 'Guided Democracy' (in 1957), the Australian media have been in the habit of characterising their Indonesian counterparts as cowed and controlled by authoritarian governments. The image of a completely repressed media was probably never entirely true, and is completely at odds with the almost anarchic freedoms that the Indonesian media have enjoyed since the fall of Suharto in May 1998. In the new millennium, the Indonesian national media are highly diversified, both in terms of ownership and editorial positioning, and the regional media are often deeply marked by local cultural concerns. The idea, promoted by both successive Indonesian governments, and to some extent by Western media discourse, that state-control of media is somehow prescribed by something called 'Indonesian' (or Asian) culture is demonstrably wrong. If a cultural consensus legitimising a command-and-compliance model of media ever existed, then in post-New Order Indonesia that consensus is well and truly dead.

It is almost impossible to generalise on how this huge-linguistically, socially, politically and culturally diverse-media covered the story of one of many foreign drug smugglers in Indonesian jails. Much of the regional media paid only scant attention to the case. In Bali, the newspapers were concerned mainly by the impact that the case might have on its tourist trade, and were fascinated by the behaviour of the Australian journalists and tourists (see Darma Putra's contribution). On the morning of the verdict, the island's oldest and largest daily paper, Ball Post, ran with the headline: Observing Preparations for Corby case: Visitors Forbidden to Wear Shorts' (Melongok Persiapan Sidang Corby: Pengunjung Dilarang Pakai Celana Pendek, Ball Post Online, 27 May 2005). The article included instruction from the Chief Judge who had noted inappropriate attire amongst foreign journalists and crew.

The Indonesian national media has no illusions about the national judicial system. In the first six months of 2005, as the Corby case progressed in the Bali courts in accordance with Indonesian law, the Indonesian national media (centred in Jakarta) were grappling with two murder cases, which were showing up serious deficiencies in post-New Order Indonesia's law enforcement system. On 7 September 2004, high profile Human Rights lawyer Munir had been murdered on a Garuda international flight. In the second case, on 1 January 2005, in the Hilton hotel in Jakarta, Adiguna Sutowo, younger brother of prominent businessman Ponco Sutowo and son of the once all powerful oil-chief Ibnu Sutowo, shot dead a waiter, in full public view. In both cases the highest rank of business and political elements were involved, preventing or disrupting the operations of police and prosecution. If the Australian media were seriously interested in examining the Indonesian judiciary they would have done well to pay attention to the politics of money and power, fear and corruption that the Indonesian media were unearthing around these two cases.

For the Indonesian media, their only real interest in the Corby case was driven by their mystified fascination with the Australian media's coverage of it. On the whole, the Australian media got a fair trial at the hands of their Indonesian counterpart; they were found wanting on many counts. The Australian media had 'widely and wildly suggested' (Jakarta Post Online, 30 June 2005) during the early weeks of the trial that Corby faced the death sentence, but, as Indonesian papers pointed out, not one person in Indonesia, either foreign or local, had ever been sentenced to death for trafficking marijuana (though heroin and cocaine smugglers had).

On one count of misleading the Australian public: guilty

Public polls, published in a number of Australian papers, showed that even as the evidence was being presented to the court in Bali, 90 per cent of the Australian public had already declared Corby innocent. As a thoughtful editorial piece in the Jakarta Post pointed out:

A person is found guilty or innocent on the basis of evidence brought before the court and not by public opinion... But the diatribes by the Australian public and media against the Indonesian legal system while the trial was still in progress have certainly been very unhelpful. The Indonesian courts have their flaws... but it was dead wrong of the Australian public and media to prejudge the court... (30 June 2005).

On one count of promoting a kangaroo court: guilty.

The same Jakarta Post article speculated on the impact of Australian media's heavy handed presence on the outcome of Corby's case. There is little doubt that since the fall of Suharto's 33-year dictatorship, the Indonesian judiciary has been struggling to reform itself-in particular to gain autonomy from the executive government, but also to ensure that it is seen to be autonomous of all pressures from vested interests, whether Indonesian or foreign. In December 2001, another young woman, a Mexican, had been found guilty of attempting to smuggle over fifteen kilos of marijuana-more than three times the amount in Corby's bag. The Mexican got only seven years. Clearly, the judges had been harsh on Corby-a harshness, the Jakarta Post suggested, provoked in some measure by the intense pressure from a foreign media to deliver a 'not guilty' verdict. It is arguable that in the Indonesian political context three mid-level government bureaucrats (the judges in a provincial court are, after all, just that) would have felt the absolute need to prove themselves above any accusation of influence from a foreign, well-heeled and powerful media. Had the Australian media then provoked terrible consequences for Corby?

On one count of perverting the course of justice: guilty?

The Australian 'public' in the Indonesian media

The mainstream Indonesian print media assumed that the Australian media reflected Australian public opinion. Tempo, the most respected Indonesian national weekly, devoted its May cover story to Jemaah Corbiah-literally 'Corby's community', but with all the connotations of a religious fraternity or a fundamentalist movement (see also Vickers 2005 and MacRae's contribution). Although the magazine might be forgiven for assuming that a popular Corbyite uprising was imminent, (a conclusion perhaps unavoidable when following the media coverage of Corby from a distance), one needs to always question any conflation of the public and the media.

I started this article suggesting that the Corby story needs to be seen as a popular Australian TV drama. So let me close with an episode that was never screened. You pretty much had to be a Corby-junkie-looking for out-takes and following the script development online-to know about this episode.

On 3 June 2005, a rally was held in Brisbane to protest against Corby's 20-year sentence. There were 21 reporters, camera operators and photographers at the rally, easily outnumbering the handful of pro-Corby protesters. 'I'm very disappointed', said the organiser Guy Pillgrim, 'because so many people are so passionate about this'. Given the lack of interest in the rally, one had to question if, indeed, the Australian

'people' were quite as passionate about Corby's trials as the media claimed. Is it possible that the so called pro-Corby (and almost axiomatically, anti-Indonesian) frenzy, which embarrassed the government and every intelligent commentator on Indonesia-Australia relations, was just a popular television beat-up?

There is little doubt that there was intense audience interest in the 'trials of Corby'. Otherwise, two private television channels would not have given hours of live coverage from the courtroom on the day of the verdict. But perhaps this audience interest was the same kind of affect generated for the characters in Big Brother or Australian Idol or, indeed, for the even more clearly fictional characters of the midday soaps. Of course we cry when a soap heroine is wrongfully imprisoned, and we might even write letters of protest to Channel 10 when our favourite gets thrown out of the Big Brother house unfairly. But Australians don't go out to protest the fate of televisual characters.

What really happened to the real Schapelle Corby is a tragedy. But the discourse around the television character of the same name has its own dangerous consequences. Foreign, in this instance Indonesian, media habitually construct their images of Australians out of representations in the Australian media. Goenawan Mohamad, former editor of Tempo and arguably the most intellectual of Indonesian journalists, once suggested that all of Indonesian television has become 'soap-opera-ised' (Tempo, 40/11, 11-17 June 2002). It would be useful perhaps for Indonesians to recognise that the Australian media were not that different from their own.