Chapter 10

**Awaking from the Big Sleep:
Kantor Berita 68H**

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Indonesia found itself in a unique situation under Suharto's *New Order* regime: there was strict state control of news broadcasts, but, at the same time, a relatively liberal environment for licensing small local radio stations. This spawned a rather unusual scene, with hundreds of small stations all over the huge country, independent in terms of ownership, but in terms of content restricted to rebroadcasting the rigidly censored news bulletins of the government's RRI (Radio Republik Indonesia) several times a day. Independent news programs were prohibited. Apart from the official news, these privately owned local stations generally only played music and ran commercials. Even during the May 1998 riots in Jakarta, many local stations kept blasting heavy metal music at their frightened audiences, apparently oblivious to the social, political and human drama unfolding outside their windows, in front of their very eyes.

Radio's journalistic indifference sharply contrasted with the print media, which were fighting – especially in urban centres – an uphill battle with the regime for more editorial independence. There was frequent banning of publications venturing too far into investigative journalism,[1] and a whole *samizdat* underground emerged made up of writers either sacked from official journals, or even devoting their careers from the outset to the underground press. These journalists started organising themselves in institutions like the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) and the Institute for the Study of Free Flow of Information (ISAI), operating on the fringes of the law, or outside of it. In short, unlike radio, there was a lot happening with print media, which was much livelier and daring, and far less complacent, than those in neighbouring Singapore or Malaysia.

The problem, of course, was that print media had, and still have, very limited reach in a country so huge, and impoverished, as Indonesia.[2] Critical journals like Tempo or Detik, even in the good times when they were not banned, had a relatively low circulation, and mostly only reached the urban middle class. The penetration of *samizdat* publications like X-pos, was naturally lower still. Even the very best of the print media could in no way compete with the broadcast media, especially radio. While the cumulative circulation of all papers published in Indonesia has been hovering around five million, there are now an estimated forty million FM/AM radio receivers in the country. A newspaper is usually read by several people, but radio sets serve whole families, especially in the countryside. By any count, newspaper readership is just a fraction of the vast masses tuning into radio. But what did these masses find on the air during the Suharto years?

Similar to Eastern Europe, there were some foreign broadcasts aimed at Indonesia. The BBC, VOA, Radio Netherlands and Radio Australia all had Indonesian language programs reaching the archipelago. These were, however, beamed to Indonesia on the SW band from afar. The sound quality was poor, even without the occasional jamming, and so was the relevance of most programs. For most people, the RRI news bulletin was all there was

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[1] Detik, Tempo, and Editor were all banned in 1994, for example.
[2] With a population of 200 million, Indonesia is the 4th most highly populated country in the world. Its communication problems are exacerbated by its geography – it is an archipelago made up of 17,000 islands, 6,000 of which are inhabited.

for information, but this was mostly pro-government propaganda with little or no information value, so people didn't expect much from radio in terms of news. They tuned in to radio for the music and rarely thought of the potential of the medium for news and information programming. The huge potential of this powerful medium lay dormant for decades. There were always some people in the underground press who realised the potential power of radio, but there was little they could do, given the Suharto-imposed controls.

These controls ended with Suharto's demise in 1998. The fall of the New Order regime led to a sudden liberalisation of media, easing of state controls and the fading away of old taboos. Radio stations were now allowed to broadcast whatever they wanted. The problem was, however, nobody had ever done independent radio news in Indonesia before. There was no basic radio journalism equipment, no experienced radio journalists, and often not even a desire to start producing independent radio news. Many stations argued that their listeners were not interested in news; they demanded music. That was of course true – since there had never been any relevant and reliable news broadcast on the radio, listeners did not even imagine it, let alone ask for it. In all of Makassar (Ujung Pandang), for instance, a major city of more than 800,000 inhabitants and the administrative centre for East Indonesia, there was only one radio reporter during the Suharto years, and he still remembers how hard it was to explain to people what he did for a living. As time was to tell, however, as soon as there was real news on air, listeners came running, and demanded ever more.

In addition to news-challenged broadcast culture, there were a number of practical problems. Independent radios in Indonesia were mostly cash-strapped, shoestring operations with minimal technical facilities, minimal technical and administrative staff, and a couple of on-air DJ playing pirated tapes or CDs. There was no budget for computers, reporters, or the Internet. Obviously, fresh new ideas were needed to break out of this situation, and jump-start the very concept of news radio in Indonesia.

Meanwhile, in far-away Prague on the other side of the globe, the newly established Center for Advanced Media (C@MP) was experimenting with digital audio compression, then a relatively new technology. C@MP and its Indonesian partner, the Institute for the Study of Free Flow of Information (ISAI), were already working together to support the print media, and they realised that digital audio compression could help circumvent existing constraints on radio news in Indonesia.

The idea was simple. Since independent radio stations did not have the means to produce their own news in any significant quality or quantity, a solution was to rebroadcast national newsfeeds coming from a central production centre, and to share local news reports with other small stations. The state-owned network of relay stations that had been used to distribute the official newscasts in the Suharto era was not available for independent news, so the Internet would be used to distribute compressed digital audio.

Technology was the easy part

At that time, most people thought of Internet radio in terms of streaming or webcasting, technologies that were impractical given Indonesia's underdeveloped telecommunications infrastructure. A more feasible option was to distribute programs via the Internet not in real time as streams, but in "near-real" time as compressed files sent to stations by email or downloaded via FTP. The local stations could then broadcast the programs, reaching out to their regular audiences. Only in this way, by combining "new" and "traditional" media, could independent national programming reach significant numbers of listeners.

The "new medium" of Internet provided a convenient substitute for the missing "old media" infrastructure, enabling the creation of a nation-wide virtual broadcast network offering much of the functionality of the brick-and-mortar relay system owned by the state, but at a fraction of the cost. On top of that, the Internet-based distribution offered a more

flexible system allowing for easy feedback from participants, and two-way sharing of programs. A news item produced in Aceh could almost instantly be heard in any part of the country with a participating station, and stations in Aceh could broadcast programs produced by any of the other participants.

In technical terms, we opted for MP3[3] format instead of the then-prevailing Real Audio, because it was easier to handle as files, as opposed to streams, and for a number of other practical considerations, like the better size-to-quality ratio at bit-rates needed for broadcast-quality audio. Another advantage of MP3 over Real Audio was the possibility to decompress files back to wave format for re-editing. Given the diversity of participating stations, this was potentially useful for members particular about maintaining the integrity of their broadcasting profile. Stations could edit the material, changing its form and emphasis to more reflect local sensibilities or interests, although in practice this was rarely done.

The technology was the easy part. The organisation of the network was much more complex. Apart from the few promoters of the project, there was not much enthusiasm at first. Many of the potential member stations did not see the advantages, and there was generally a lot of scepticism concerning the appeal of news programs for radio listeners. Another challenge was to form a group of dedicated radio journalists to service the production hub in Jakarta. As we have already observed, there were no radio journalists in the country and thus the entire team had to be built up and trained from scratch.

The network

The organisers used the clout of their parent institution, ISAI, a renowned and well-connected media organisation, to attract young journalistic talent for the production hub, and to reach out to small independent stations all over the country with an offer to join the network-to-be. Sometimes a little reluctant at first, local stations soon found it increasingly difficult to resist such offers. Once the concept took off, and quality, independent news began to be heard on air, it quickly proved to be a major audience-catcher. Listeners' expectations changed fast, and it became imperative for stations to carry news programs, if for no other reason than the need to compete with stations that did.

A production studio was set up at ISAI's office in Jakarta, equipped with a digital mixer and a computer. Next to the studio, a newsroom was built with more computers for journalists. C@MP provided the initial training for local trainers who would later spread the skills further around. The topics covered digitising of audio input into wave files, editing them on a computer, file compression, and various methods of distributing the compressed files to remote stations via the Internet, including maintenance of list- and mail-servers. After about a week of training, the whole operation was localised. Trainers and organisers from ISAI took over and from that moment on, they ran the show independently, relying on local initiative and innovation to drive the project.

The network's growth began modestly. Radio 68H began with fourteen stations in locations selected to be more or less representative of the central islands of the archipelago. Stations representatives were invited to Jakarta in March 1999, where they were trained in both technical and journalistic skills, given a computer with preinstalled software, and instructed in the mechanisms of the planned network's functioning.

The actual broadcast via these first fourteen stations started in April 1999. The amount of production was limited at first – just several one-minute programs a day. This small amount of news nevertheless had a snow-balling effect, changing broadcasters'

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[3] MP3 (MPEG-1 Audio Layer-3) is a technology and format for software compression of audio while preserving the level of sound quality when it is played back.

behaviour all over the huge country. There were 60 stations in the 68H network by August 1999 and 100 a year later.

Radio 68H's members not only receive news for rebroadcast, they also produce their own news and send it to Jakarta for redistribution to the other network members. Most of the new members had never produced news and thus had to be trained by 68H staff. ISAI and 68H now organise eight regional training courses a year, covering editorial and technical issues. Some 300 journalists have been trained and many of these have become active correspondents for the network. Currently, there are about fifty regular correspondents, each contributing one to two local news items a day.

The birth of the network coincided with rather hectic political developments, culminating, in mid-1999, with the first free elections in Indonesia in forty years. The situation was changing rapidly with new parties springing up and political alliances being formed and betrayed. All this was reported to listeners. Radio news was quickly established on the airwaves and, in some respects, became the main field for competition among local stations. As more and more stations carried news, it was difficult for their competitors to ignore it.

As the number of member stations grew, so did the amount of production. A thirty minute news program, the Evening Bulletin (Buletin Sore), was introduced in August 1999. It became very popular, but it also increased pressure on the already inadequate infrastructure. For some of the stations, especially those in rural areas already struggling to download the one- or two-minute pieces, the bulletin proved too much, requiring several hours of a modem connection to download the thirty minute program. It was a formidable disincentive both for existing and prospective 68H member stations. The Internet, which had made it possible for the network to emerge, had become a bottleneck. It was clear that without a solution to the problem of insufficient bandwidth, the network would not be able to expand and might possibly collapse.

Look to the sky

The obvious solution to network congestion was satellite. Given the size and fractured landscape of the archipelago, satellite had long been used there for communication and broadcasting, and Indonesia had even launched a couple of its own satellites. After some shopping around, however, it became clear that "off-the-shelf" satellite solutions would be far too expensive for a project of this kind to employ. Once again, an innovative idea was needed.

Such an idea materialised, just when most needed, in the form of an offer from PSN, a local Indonesian satellite company. Instead of using the standard, but very expensive digital audio system, or even the cheaper but still unaffordable Single Channel per Carrier technology (SCPC), PSN proposed to take advantage of its digital video broadcast (DVB) system. Originally devised for satellite TV broadcasting, the DVB package came with four 64 kbps audio channels. PSN offered one of these to 68H on an affordable basis.

DVB is a common technology in Indonesia and elsewhere, and there was no need for expensive specialised equipment on the receiving end – standard, mass-produced satellite TV dishes and decoders were all it took for the member stations to receive the satellite feed. The downside is that the system only works one-way – local stations can receive programmes, but cannot send them via the satellite. For this, they would need an uplink, an expensive piece of equipment with regulatory implications. Once again, the creative integration of technologies provided the solution, and the Internet network that had been put in place earlier was used for the return channel. Local stations use the satellite link to receive newsfeeds sent from Jakarta and Internet for uploading their own programs. Since there is far more programming sent from the hub then uploaded by individual stations, this asymmetric system works fine.

Introduction of the new satellite-based distribution system was a major breakthrough that spawned further growth in both membership and programming. By the end of 2000, Radio 68H had 200 member stations. The aim is now to have a participating station in each of the countries 320 municipalities.

A sustainable business model

The volume of programming, now uninhibited by the bottleneck of the terrestrial network, grew to 15 hourly editions a day between 06:00 and 21:06 West Indonesian Time. Three of these editions are longer, thirty minute programs, the rest news bulletins of six minutes each. The total amount of programming rose from the initial several minutes to the current level of almost three hours a day.

This phenomenal growth of course raises the question of the project's long-term sustainability. The endeavour was originally funded with a start-up grant from the Media Development Loan Fund[4] and the Asia Foundation, and later with a grant from the Dutch Foreign Ministry's development program. From the beginning, the understanding was that this would eventually become a self-supporting project, financed primarily with income from advertising. To this end, the project was registered in January 2000 as a business entity under the name PT Media Lintas Inti Nusantara, with 60 percent of shares going to the management and employees, and 40 percent to ISAI as the parent organisation.

With its unique profile and nation-wide reach, Radio 68H enjoys a high potential for advertising revenue. This potential has so far not been fully realised. One of the reasons seems to be the very novelty of its concept – potential advertisers have yet to fully appreciate it. The network's management has been trying to develop this potential by strengthening the marketing department and organising promotional campaigns. Advertising revenue is now slowly becoming a major source of income, gradually reducing dependency on outside funding.

Developing a sustainable business model also means finding a suitable mechanism for sharing the advertising revenue among the network's members and the production hub in Jakarta. There are six minutes reserved for advertising in every half-hour of programming. At this point, about 30 percent of these slots are being used, generating income to cover some two thirds of operational costs. The network could become fully sustainable from advertising with a utilisation rate of roughly 50 percent. The income is shared between Jakarta and the member stations according to elaborate rules reflecting the stations' profiles, amount of Radio 68H programming used, and other factors. For many of the participating stations, especially the smaller and more remote ones, their share of the advertising pie represents a substantial boost for their bottom line, helping them in their own sustainability struggle.

Apart from commercial advertisements, the network also carries a lot of public service announcements, another important source of income. Local and international non-profit organisations take advantage of the network's reach and popularity to distribute their messages to the most remote parts of the country. The Indonesian National Commission for Human Rights ran its non-violence campaign on the network, for example, since it was the only way to reach many conflict zones like Aceh, the Moluccas, and West Papua (Irian Jaya). Similarly, the Aceh youth wing of the second largest national Muslim organisation, Muhammadiyah, ran a campaign for religious tolerance on the radio, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ran an information campaign for East Timorese refugees in West Timor. These announcements combine the best of both worlds for both 68H and the sponsoring institutions – they spread important messages, and at the same time support the network financially.

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[4] Media Development Loan Fund (MDLF) is the parent organisation of C@MP.

The 68H network now reaches about 20 million listeners all over Indonesia. According to an August 2001 survey conducted by the Association of Radio Stations in East Java (PRSSNI Jawa Timur) in fourteen major cities throughout the region, 68H is by far the most preferred source for radio news. Even some local stations of the state-run RRI have joined the network and rebroadcast 68H programming.

The 68H network has undergone a period of tremendous growth in the past two years. But there is still potential for further development, in both technical and programming terms. After decades of forced hibernation, radio is coming alive in Indonesia, bringing reliable independent news, and a calming voice of moderation into the post-Suharto turmoil.

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