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Alamat Redaksi	: Sekretariat ISKI Bandung Jl. Imam Bonjol 16 Bandung Telp. 022-2510894
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The Waned News Agencies: A Certainty

By Rajab Ritonga¹⁾

ABSTRACT

Rapid development of information and technology has changed the world in great many ways. Among them was a major change on media flows and operation. As a key player in traditional media landscape, news agencies were among those who were being threatened by the new trend of producing and consuming the news.

As information technology growing more easier to operate, more opportunities are opened up for laypeople to produce their own news. Consequently, people (and also media corporation) were no longer being depended on news agencies as their main source of news.

This situation could lead to the diminishing of news agency. To avoid such disadvantage situation, news agencies should repositioned themselves and redefined their roles among public.

By expanding their service to more channels and medium, news agencies would be successfully surviving the future threat.

A. Overview of Current Situation

The rapid development of the information technology has raised question about the future of news agencies in the current era of Internet and media convergence. On one side, there is a question whether the internet would eliminate news agencies. Meanwhile, on the other side, another question arise: would news agency be badly needed for the new era? While newspapers are facing its "bad times", news agencies are also facing similar position. In Indonesia, among out of the three news agencies, only the ANTARA

1) DR. Rajab Ritonga, M.Si, Director of General Affairs and Human Resources Development of the ANTARA News Agency of Indonesia

News Agencies exists up now, the other two, namely the Indonesia's News Agency (KNI) and the Armed Forces News (PAB) had long been closed due to financial loss.

The advanced computer-based communication technology and internet have become a threat for the existency of the national news agencies. Many online services, including personal-based site (blog) or institutional-based site (website) caused main products of national news agencies being left by mass media. Information sources come from all parts of the world, and not only from the national or international news agencies. The internet-based communication technology has brought up both professional and non-professional sources of information personally and insitutionally.

Both personal-based and public-based media one have, indeed converged. And in such a situation, we could ask whether or not news agencies would be able to maintain its existence as information broker for mass media?

B. Upcoming the Internet for News Agencies

The technology being applied by news agencies (*wire-technology, telegraphic, teletext, facsimile*) are no longer enough to face the incoming online-based information which has almost eliminated the world boundaries. News Agencies are no longer powerful over the control of the human resources (journalists), infrastructure, and information dissemination as all parties now can be sources of information as famously mentioned in Citizen Journalism. In short, News Agencies should be able to turn themselves into the direct-trader of information to the direct customers. The classical model of gathering and disseminating news, which was one of the characteristic of News Agencies, had been defeated by online media. News Agencies had to save their business, among other things, by asking for subsidy to the government or privatizing their business.

Internet is actually both an opportunity and a threat for News Agencies. Online-media offers significant decrease on the communication expenses in the news gathering and dissemination. Besides, it may also extend the coverage of the news dissemination. While in on the other side, internet has become one of the contributors to the unstable market of News Agencies.

National News Agencies are important sources for international News Agencies' services and also a feed back tool for National News Agencies. Countries view news agencies as a means for their national development and a tool offering their positive image in the international fora. The waning news agencies could lead to increasing symptoms of fragmentation and distrust on news sources. Technical challenges being faced by News Agencies following the occurence of Internet is, in fact, a fundamental problem relates to the concept of national News Agencies.

The golden times of News Agencies had passed. In the past, mass media depended badly on news agencies as news feeds. Now, national news agencies have slowly but surely being left by mass media. However, international news-agencies has different condition as they have strong network. International news bureaus also reflect a model of business which do not rely solely on news selling.

On national scale, international news agencies disseminate information dominantly. Many mass media rely much on the news feeds from them. National news agencies, suffering from financial loss, could not compete against the financially healthy news agencies. Oliver Boyd-Barrett clarifies the assumption: the majority of news agencies in the developing countries are on critical condition, tend to go bankrupt. The news agencies that would remain exist are : (1) news agencies that change and diversify their business, or (2) news agencies which are fully supported by the government (Boyd-Barrett in UNESCO,2001:4).

Observing such conditions, the question arise: are news agencies still needed in the Global Era? How important is the existence of news agencies for a nation? These questions are relevantly to be raised, especially when we see news agencies from the point of view of business. From this side, the business of news agency is unhealthy, due to the fact that this institution is always suffering loss which caused by high operational cost. From the political view, national news agencies have significant function as the one that provides domestic and international news for national and local media. News are made comprehensively by showing respect to the interest of majority constituent. National news agencies has also functioned themselves as

a channel for international news agencies to serve domestic media. They also provide a feed back to the national and local news for international news agencies.

As the news monopoly would be in the hands of the international news agencies, the disappearance of news agencies then might lead to increasing fragmentation and distrust toward news sources. From this point of view, it could be understood that UNESCO has been strongly supported the establishment of national news agencies since 1960s with the aim of increasing news gathering and dissemination in many countries and introduced to the varied sources of news.

Meanwhile, with strong support from technology, international news agencies has become more dominant in the news dissemination as stated by Paterson (2006) who did the content analysis on the international news feeds. Paterson said international news agencies rarely accepted news feeds from local media in the developing countries as the news were not suitable with the global news requirements.

C. Reposition: Unavoidable Decision for News Agency

The reposition of news agencies has become an action that must be taken to maintain the existence of the news agencies in the Convergence Era. Many news agencies which suffered from financial problems in 2001, turned out to be healthier in 2007 after repositioning their newsroom. New Zealand Press Association (NZPA), DPA, and *British Press Association* (PA) were among news agencies that had such experience. The assumption about Internet threat for news agencies was proven to be wrong. Nowadays, all news agencies take the benefit of the online-based information services. Internet has increased the amount of clients due to flexible information given in affordable-news-package. The package so long has proven reducing distribution cost.

However, news agencies are still facing threats from some points despite their reposition's action, namely (1) westernization in relation with domination of international news agencies, (2) concentration of ownership by media tycoons, (3) restriction from respective countries due to govern-

ment's subsidy, (4) the elimination of cut-back services, (5) client's monopoly and (6) changing needs and hopes among clients toward a news.

To overcome such challenges, news agencies develop converged business models, namely (1) subscription with flexible payment (based on what being used by the client), (2) inclusive services based on free market requirements, (3) reduce the government's subsidy, (4) reduce the dependency from their media clients, (5) systemize and commercialize additional services for both media and non-media clients, (6) intensive use of online system for their production and dissemination process with additional broadband for multimedia services, (7) integrate the services of text, video, data and intensification of design and presentation, (8) intensification of lingual and modal-based services, (9) reduce unnecessary obstacles from the first-hand sources for direct internet hyperlink to enable end users directly contacted with archives, documents, interviews, etc, (10) a relatively loose relation with international news agencies by changing it into an "exclusive" one to enable national and international news agencies be able to compete directly in the "wet" market such as the financial services, (11) market orientation for both individual and institutional clients with special and in-depth services for institutional clients and standard and general services for individual clients (news agencies need to manage their position as both wholesaler and retailer), (12) maintain then good brand identity through an image and quality to go international, (13) promote entrepreneurship journalist culture where journalists could get income due to their managerial and technical capability.

News agencies' reposition is conducted by using Internet as the news provider. This step is followed by news agencies in the developing countries by running converged business emphasized on the market-driven model of news.

Among challenges faced by news agencies are domination of Western media and news agencies, advanced technology, limited ownership, conglomeration of media clients and restrictions imposed by governments. The others are concerning the existence of news agencies themselves: whether news agencies would continue the classical journalism model (with the stress on objectivity, impartiality and problematical balance) or to develop a point-of-view journalism model.

D. ANTARA: Transformation Through Reposition Strategy

ANTARA News Agencies has been implementing a reposition since 2005, among others by changing its legal status from a (free) institution into a state-owned news agencies based on Government Regulation No.40/2007. Consequently, ANTARA has declared itself as a company that should seek for profit and no longer mainly served as a state political instrument.

The reposition was strategically implemented by declaring a world class news agency vision in order to remove people into a knowledge-based society. Within such vision, ANTARA aimed to (1) play roles in the world news agencies society, (2) acquire the world class working culture and system, ISO 9001 series certified, (3) set up partnership with other news agencies, (4) achieve the best content and news credibility in Asia and Pacific region, (5) maintain sustainability in terms of finance, (6) be a role model of news agencies in Asia and Pacific region, (7) producing acceptable output products both in the local and regional market, (8) focus on building a smarter nation.

Such vision is translated through a mission which aimed to (1) produce fast, accurate and important news and content, (2) build a smarter society. The mission then will be realized through (1) covering and/or disseminate information concerning state and people activities in all level, (2) provide news, photo, graphic, realtime data, audio visual, information technology and other multi media services relating with the activities of state and people, (3) provide services of appreciation and journalistic education as well as multimedia, (4) run electronic media, printing, and publishing house, and (5) establish other business suitable with company's vision and mission.

ANTARA's orientation is now no longer focused solely in the political interest, but broadened to economy interest in order be able to compete in the global scale. Its status as the state owned company has established ANTARA not only as a flag carrier, but also as a company. ANTARA is no longer playing a single role as wholesaler complete with mass media as the end-user, but also serve the public as a retailer. The products being sold are

not only information (news, photo and data) but also direct service to provide something that in the past time was considered as primary service of mass media before.

These services are not only in the form of information, but also training, education and consultation, such as journalism training. To increase its service to the clients, ANTARA runs a converged strategy, i.e. (1) ownership (by establishing television and radio divisions); (2) tactical (implemented by establishing cooperation of information exchanges with other national news agencies); (3) structural (repackaging information for many mass media as clients); (4) information collection (train reporters to be professional multimedia crews); (5) provide sophisticated equipment for reporters for completing data collection and news reporting. Such reposition has serious implications on the commodification information in ANTARA newsroom. The process by which data would transformed into a saleable information is carried out through a routine mechanism involving vertical interaction process (top to down) and horizontal interaction process (collegial relation).

Besides converged strategy, ANTARA also runs the reposition by actuating the roles, both as wholesaler and retailer through an online system. The strategy carried out by ANTARA sparks optimism toward the future of news agencies. By putting the problems into perspective, along with re-defining its roles and position, globalization which threatening the existence of traditional news agencies would gradually disappear.**

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