

Global News In Colonial Era In *Sunting Melayu* Newspaper

Maimon Herawati, Siti Karlinah, Herlina Agustin, Nuryah Asri Sjafirah

ABSTRACT: *Sunting Melayu* was considered to be the first women newspaper managed and published by female journalist or writer in Indonesia during colonial time (1912-1921). The newspaper was centered in Koto Gadang, West Sumatera and mostly managed by Rohana Kudus. The newspaper published news, articles, poem, and even advertising. To this day, there has been zero research on the scope of news published in *Sunting Melayu* newspaper. It would be then interesting to see the scope of the news published in order to understand Indonesian female journalist knowledge and understanding of the global world past the colonial boundary set up by colonialism and traditional Minang culture. This research uses content analysis methodology to examine *Sunting Melayu* newspaper between 1912-1921 as the main tool for data collection, focusing on the news sections. It is impossible to transcribe all news in the newspapers because of the massive sources. Hence it focused on the earlier edition with an assumption that the more the news producer work, the wider their journalism networking was, hence the earlier the edition was, the lesser the network would be. The news published in the earlier edition showed a wide range of news such as local news (West Sumatera), Nusantara news (Java), European news, and surprisingly China and South Africa. It showed that given the boundary set by colonialism and traditional Minang culture, news producer of *Sunting Melayu* had reached far wider world than it was expected and relayed their news to their readers.

Keywords: *Sunting Melayu*, female journalist, global news, women newspaper

1. Introduction

One nation today is what the past was. The past forms, molds, and directs the today. And tomorrow, the today would become the past. Hence, the history of one nation is important and play a crucial role in shaping the nation. In order to understand one nation, it is imperative to comprehend the turn of event that forms the history. The most important events' recorder is newspaper. Newspaper records news, death, birth, accident, and so on. One should always begin with newspaper when building the narration of nation history. *Sunting Melayu* is considered to be the first women's newspaper managed by women in Indonesia before Indonesian independence from Dutch's colonialization[1]. The editors were Rohana Kudus (28 years old at that time) and Ratna Juwita. Rohana Kudus was the main editor and writer[2]. *Sunting Melayu* published articles, history, poem, news, and even advertising. Printed weekly from West Sumatera and the first edition was in 10th of July 1912, *Sunting Melayu* continued circulating for the nine years later. It ceased the publication in 1921. As a women managed newspaper for women, *Sunting Melayu* was not far behind its counterpart from the west. *The Lily*, for example, considered as the first suffragist publication, was printed in 1849-1855, *Genius of Liberty* (1851-1853), *The Una* (1853-1855), *the Mayflower* (1861-1864), *Revolution* (1868-1870), *the Women's Journal* (1870-1931), *Ballot Box* (1876-1881), etc [3]. Comparing to western women's press, the nine years length of publication can be deemed as an amazing accomplishment, especially for colonized women. Hence, researching the content of *Sunting Melayu* is interesting to build a picture of women's life, struggle, and strive to empowerment of women under the colonialism.

To this day, there has been zero research regarding the news and scope of news published in *Sunting Melayu*. There were but scanty research regarding the content of *Sunting Melayu*, or any other women's press for that matter. There were several reasons for this condition. First and foremost, Indonesians are still struggling economically. Thus, the funding of research mostly aims to ready-to-use technology which will support the strengthening of economy at large. Researching the past, coining the complete picture of nation history is not a priority. Secondly, most cultural archives are not easily accessible to many researchers. Million of Indonesian manuscripts are stored in Netherlands' libraries. In order to access them, the cost of travel to Netherlands, the permit it requires are discouraging. Thirdly, some archives available to be examined are written in the language most researchers do not understand, which is the old Dutch, or Arabic, or old Malay. Hence, very few researches had been done so far. One research focused on *Sunting Melayu* as a catalyst for women to attain more empowered lives or a reflection of the West Sumatran women's fight for achieving their rights [4]. Another was discussing the vernacular press and the emergence of national consciousness in Indonesia which one of them was *Sunting Melayu* [5]. It is then imperative to examine the news and scope of news in *Sunting Melayu* in order to paint a picture of women's knowledge and understanding of the world around them past the colonial boundary set by colonialism and West Sumatran matrilineal culture[6]. This research will contribute to an understanding of women's lives in the past.

Indonesian Women, a Brief Outlook

It is recorded in history of olden days that Indonesian women play substantial roles. Many kingdoms in Indonesia before Dutch's occupation had queens as the head of their government. Many of the queens recorded achievements that were paralleled to kings' deeds. Ratu (queen) Kalinyamat of Jepara, for example, together with Raja (king) Johor expelled Portuguese army. There were also queen of Majapahit (Ratu Tribuana Tungga Dewi), Aceh (Sultanah Seri Ratu Alam Safiatuddin), Ternate (Ratu Siti Aisyah We Tenriolle), Kutai (Ratu Aji Sitti), etc [7]. Woman was also chronicled in the history of resistance toward

- Maimon Herawati, Journalism Department, Faculty of Communication Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia
- Siti Karlinah, Journalism Department, Faculty of Communication Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia
- Herlina Agustin, Journalism Department, Faculty of Communication Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia
- Nuryah Asri Sjafirah, Journalism Department, Faculty of Communication Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia

Western colonization. Oral history of Aceh narrated the famous figure of Laksamana Keumalahayati (1600-ish), the leader of *Inong Balee* army, which expelled Holland's De Houteman (1599) and Van Caerden (1601). However, these were hundred of year before western colonization to Indonesia. The colonization brought changes to social system, cultural norms and value, and economic status. Indonesian's women status was also shifted from equal collaborator position to what Kartini observed as constraint and shackled [8]. *Sunting Melayu* as the first women's newspaper managed by women recorded the breaking away from the constraint and shackled life. At the time of *Sunting Melayu* publication (1912-1921), only a few women could read and write. Access to education was limited to an elite group of Indonesian natives. Rohana Kudus was from an elite group. She was a step sister to Sutan Syahrir, first Indonesian prime minister, a cousin to Agus Salim, one prominent politician and amazing diplomat. Although she did not attend any school, she was able to read very early on. At the age of 8 years old, Rohana taught other children to read [2]. Understanding the news published in *Sunting Melayu* would give both knowledge of events surrounded women's lives as well as what considered to be important by women's editor to be published in the women newspaper because editor of one newspaper is the human sieve who selects and edit material for publication [9]. Editor is the person who collects all available news, decides which news will be aired, and frames the angle of news. Rohana Kudus and Ratna Juwita as editors would decide which news were to be published and in what light to present the news. It will be interesting to see which of the news value is considered to be the most important by *Sunting Melayu's* editors. Golding and Elliot suggested these criteria as news values: drama or conflict, visual attractiveness, entertainment, importance, size, proximity, negativity, brevity, recency, elites, and personalities. Sigurd Allen identified three general factors that influence the selection of news: competition, geographical area of coverage and type of audience, and budget [9] p. 166).

2. Literature Review

Sunting Melayu has been discussed in many studies. Syarifah Aini and Rhoma Dwi Aria examine nationalism discourse in *Sunting Melayu*[10]. Danil M. Chaniago examines the dynamics of women's movement in fighting for their social rights in the early 20s. *Sunting Melayu* became one of the tools of the women's struggle. Chaniago found that the most important content of *Sunting Melayu* was the emphasizing of education for women as a 'keeper' of the household. *Sunting Melayu's* mission was to improve the quality of women's lives. Chaniago stated that the existence of *Sunting Melayu* for nine years was due to the closeness of its' editor, Rohana Kudus, with the Dutch government. Chaniago analyzed 21 editions of at least 420 editions of *Sunting Melayu* publication. Chaniago did not elaborate his reason in choosing the 21 editions as well as the argument of using only limited numbers of sample[4]. Apart from Chaniago, another West Sumatran who studied *Sunting Melayu* was Yuliandre Darwis. Yuliandre Darwis examined the development of the Minangkabau press. This study uses the method of historical studies by collecting historical data through literature studies, seminars, interviews, and discussions. Darwis discussed

Minangkabau culture and traditions. In his research, Darwin explained how Islam came and developed in Minangkabau land. The results of Darwis' research concluded that the press was the arena of debate between the 'Old People' and the 'Young People'. The press became a tool for modernizing Islam and guarding the Minangkabau national awakening. *Sunting Melayu* was only discussed briefly as part of the press which is called the 'Old People' group[1]. Ahmat Adam discussed the Malay press and the revival of Indonesian nationalism. Adam employed critical history, using newspaper archives published in the colonial era. Adam found that the rise of national consciousness in Indonesia was the result of various factors and most important one was the role of indigenous press. Adam noted that *Sunting Melayu* was one of the newspapers that shaping women's perspective and national consciousness. Adam did not study *Sunting Melayu* contents closely[5]. Understanding women's lives and perspective through the text of media has been the subject of researches. Sarah Pedersen examined the motivation and agenda of women writers in the local Aberdeen newspapers 1900-1918. Pedersen found that Aberdeen women wrote a lot about their philanthropic activities. These women emphasized their letters as representatives of the domestic sphere. They used initials such as 'wife' and 'mother'[11]. Another research by Victoria Joanne Rowan dealt with relationship between the local press and women community and how women used these presses to express their opinions. Simone Elizabeth Murray discussed the foray of women to the presses and publishing companies. She focused on the politics of feminist using those mediums[12]. However, there has not any research discussing the scope of women's knowledge and understanding through their news publications [13].

3. Research Methods

This feminist history research employs historiography methods, focusing on textual analysis of news published in *Sunting Melayu* 1912-1921. The difference between historiography research with feminist historiography research are in the researcher and result of the research. "Feminist researchers produce feminist research," [14] p. 170. Michele Ollivier and Manon Tremblay defined three principles of feminist research. First, feminist research has two dimensions; not only it strives to gain new knowledge, it also move social change. Next, feminist research is based in value and belief of feminist. Feminist research engages women in research process and focus one the meaning of women give about their world although they are still in the patriarchy structure. The last identity of feminist research is its varied characters, be in methodology or branch of knowledge, and it evolves dynamically and always concerns about women [15]. This research is a feminist research. The methodology employs in this research is historiography. It deals with critically testing, analyzing the records and artifacts of the past [16]p. 32. One event or source might have different meaning depending on the time of the writing, political perspective, the aim of the writing, writer background, and the framework used. Gottschalk defined four steps in historiography: collecting relevant sources; selecting useable and unnecessary sources for research; analyzing the research sources; and writing the result. For this research, two locations for sources are

discovered. Digital copies of *Sunting Melayu* are stored in National Library of Indonesian Republic (Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia-PNRI), Jakarta. PNRI accumulated more than 1600 files of *Sunting Melayu* (1912-1921) pages, began from second edition of *Sunting Melayu* which published at July 1912, to the last edition in 1921. One edition had four pages. PNRI archives of *Sunting Melayu* digital copies were made from the scanning of original paper. The quality of scanning was good even though some of paper edges were tore. Other location of old papers is National Press Museum, Solo although the editions were limited. It would be impossible to include all the edition of *Sunting Melayu*, hence the sample was taken from the earliest ten editions of *Sunting Melayu*. The assumption was the more the news producer work, the wider their journalism networking was, hence the earlier the edition was, the lesser the network would be therefore would be women's more original network and knowledge. The first phase in this research was compiling all available materials. The primary source of research data was Perpustakaan Nasional Republik Indonesia (PNRI) or National Library of Republic of Indonesia. PNRI has massive collection of Indonesia during colonial time, including *Sunting Melayu*. Research data was also collected from National Press Museum. It would be impossible to examine all the materials and therefore this research focus on the ten earliest edition of *Sunting Melayu* because the earlier edition, the more original the networking of women editor of *Sunting Melayu* was. The later the edition of *Sunting Melayu*, the bigger the networking, which amplified by the distribution of earlier edition of *Sunting Melayu*. It would safe to assume that the earlier edition contained the original editors' news networking, be it 'kawat' or telegram, or other printed source. The originality of their work would explain more of their sphere, instead of a 'borrowed' network from newly acquired press system.

4. Results And Discussion

The news published in the earlier edition showed a wide range of news coverage such as local news (West Sumatera), Nusantara news (Java), European news, and surprisingly Asia and South Africa. Local news were varied, from a bolted horse which resulted of the passengers toppled over to the river, to the opening of women's school in many places. Java news were related to the possibility of women's admittance to medical school, the progress of the said plan, and even the fake currency. Surprisingly, 36% of news published in *Sunting Melayu* were global news, and the rest were being Indonesian news. It shows that by looking at news coverage, *Sunting Melayu* already breached the limiting wall created by Dutch's colonization and West Sumatera's traditional culture. Women's editor of *Sunting Melayu* had reached the wider world, which was unthinkable in the era they lived which had no internet connection, no daily television, nor connection flight. As I understood from some news relayed by *Sunting Melayu*, women editor mentioned 'kawat' or 'telegram' as one source of their global news, as well as other printed foreign papers. It showed that these women editors had access to reading materials that broaden their knowledge immensely, in the era when reading skill was rare and difficult to attain for women in general. Bad news is good news; this is an

old dogma of the press which has been applied as well in the past. However, only 28% of local news, and 15% of global news which contained negative news such as death, starvation, murder, fake currency, etc. It showed that as 'ancient' as *Sunting Melayu* was, women's editor of *Sunting Melayu* believed that good news was better news. This belief showed either that they had positive judgment of their readers or they aimed to educate their reader with the news they shared. According to news value, *Sunting Melayu* chose to publish more positive news from global news than local news. There are two ways reading this fact. Either *Sunting Melayu* think that negative local news were more needed to be shared in order to learn life lesson from it, or women's editor had more access to negative news from local sources than global sources. Almost half of the negative news from Indonesia were related to currency and finance. Three of the news were about fake currency and the warning regarding the circulation of fake currency. The rest of local news were about death and accident. *Sunting Melayu*'s main writer and editor, Rohana Kudus, built women's handicraft company whose employees were women she taught knitting and tapestry. Rohana Kudus was a teacher, an entrepreneur, and a writer. Hence, it is understandable that economic dimension of news value became more significant to her than others. Most global news contained new technology information and new discovery. Women's involvement in the army were published three times, which implied that *Sunting Melayu* used the advancement of western women to advocate women's progression for its readers. Almost a third of positive local news were related to education and school. These were in line with *Sunting Melayu* tagline, 'Bertoekoek bertambahlah ilmoe dan kepandaian perempoean', or [by this newspaper] women gain more knowledge and skill.

5. Conclusion

Examining the news contents of *Sunting Melayu*, research shows that given the boundary set by colonialism and traditional West Sumatera's culture, women news producer of *Sunting Melayu* had reached far wider world than it was expected of them and relayed their news to their readers as part as their mission to educate their women peer. They also chose to publish more good news than bad news. More research need to be done to understand the source of information of *Sunting Melayu* editor. It will be interesting and give more depth if the process of news reporting is also researched. Therefore it will shed light on the network of knowledge these women rely on.

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