Re-inventing Tabloid Journalism in Indonesia

Diyah Hayu Rahmitasari

Biodata: Diyah Hayu Rahmitasari is a junior lecturer at the Department of Communications, Universitas Atma Jaya Yogyakarta, Indonesia. She holds a master degree in Mass Communications from Edith Cowan University, Australia. Her research interests are in journalism production, media use, media engagement, and social media participation. She can be contacted at dhrahmitasari@gmail.com

Abstract
Tabloid journalism is a contentious phenomenon that has provoked debate in many countries, including Indonesia. The main accusation levelled at this genre of journalism is sensationalism. However, tabloid journalism actually offers new perspectives by catering to the taste of the ‘untouched’ readers previously ignored by mainstream newspapers. This article describes the phenomenon of tabloid journalism in Indonesia through an analysis of the two highest circulating Indonesian tabloid newspapers, Pos Kota and Lampu Hijau. It is based on a combination of quantitative content analysis and qualitative email interviews (conducted in 2011-2012) as its research methods. The main goals of this research are to reinvent the characteristics of tabloid journalism in Indonesia as exemplified by Pos Kota and Lampu Hijau, as well as to discover the role these papers play in the development of Indonesian journalism.

Keywords: Indonesia, Lampu Hijau, Daily Newspaper, Pos Kota, Tabloid Journalism

Introduction
Tabloid journalism is a rapidly growing phenomenon around the world. In the United Kingdom, for example, tabloids are the most popular newspapers and hold the majority share of the total newspaper circulation (Johansson, 2007, p. 83). In addition, in South Africa, until quite recently, The Daily Sun was the leading newspaper with a circulation of around 500,000 copies per day (Wasserman, 2010, p. 1). The same situation can be found in Australia where tabloids such as The Daily Telegraph and Herald Sun are daily newspapers with the highest circulation (Janda, 2013). In Indonesia, the tabloid newspaper Pos Kota registers the highest sales figures (Yusuf, 2009, p. 26).

Despite their popularity, tabloid newspapers are often met with negative views from scholars and media practitioners due to their perceived low quality. Some people argue that tabloid newspapers lower the standard of democratic communication and exercise a negative influence on their readers (Johansson, 2007, p. 83). According to Kitch (2009), tabloid journalism often involves dramatization in order ‘to shock and provoke strong emotional responses among readers’ (p. 29), which is normally avoided by conventional journalists.

In contrast, there are those who praise tabloid journalism for its readability and affordability. According to Conboy (2002, p. 44), tabloid journalism is becoming acceptable, compared to other kinds of journalism, because it offers lighter issues that are easier to read and accessible to sections of the population who, due to increasing literacy in developing
countries, are first-time newspaper readers. Furthermore, tabloid journalism addresses problems of the common people, as distinct from the wealthy. It meets the information needs of people in lower socioeconomic groups and creates an opportunity for them to understand current affairs. As Kavanagh (2011) argues, ‘We turn complex subjects (politics, commerce, war) into crisp easily understood copy’ (p. 27). Thus, tabloid newspapers extend the scope of newspapers’ readers.

In addition to differences of perspective on the value of tabloid journalism, there are also different views about the definition of a ‘tabloid’. According to Bessie (as cited in Franklin, Hamer, Hanna, Kinsey & Richardson, 2005, p. 279) tabloids are defined by their focus on sensational and emotional content. Bird (as cited in Wasserman, 2010, p. 14) says that tabloid journalism is well known for its distinctive content. Distinctive, according to Bird (as cited in Wasserman, 2010, p.14) refers to ‘the human-interest, graphically told story, heavy on pictures and short, pithy, highly stereotyped prose.’ Similarly, Fox, Van Sickel and Steiger (2007) argue that “the so-called Yellow Journalism, pulp magazines, and “muckraking” investigative reports of the early twentieth century can be considered examples’ (p. 2) of tabloid journalism. However, according to some definitions ‘tabloid’ can also refer to the format or period of the publication (Wasserman, 2010, p. 14).

Tabloid journalism is perceived differently in different countries. In Britain, with a well-known case of the phone hacking scandal (see Barnett, 2012), tabloid journalism is often perceived as something untrustworthy and unethical. By contrast, in South Africa, tabloid journalism has a more positive meaning for readers since it ‘articulates an experience of daily life in post-apartheid South Africa … which remains precarious, dangerous, difficult and uncertain’ (Wasserman, 2010, p. xi). Media content and formats are definitely ‘shaped by cultural, political and market forces’ (Wasserman, 2010, p. 2). Therefore, more comprehensive localized studies about tabloid journalism are needed to better understand the tabloid journalism phenomenon.

Characteristics of the newspapers studied

_Pos Kota_

_Pos Kota_ was established on 15 April 1970 and was the first tabloid newspaper in Indonesia. It was the pioneer of tabloid style newspapers in the country. _Pos Kota_, with its tagline ‘Harian Independen’, literally means ‘independent daily newspaper’, had the goal of providing a different style of newspaper to the major newspapers of the time, which tended to focus on national political news. By contrast, _Pos Kota_ focused on local issues, crime, stories of a sexual nature, and instances of deviant or anti-social behavior (Soebekti, 2000, p. x).

According to Soebekti (as cited in Ghazali & Nasution, 2000, p. 6), _Pos Kota_ sought to serve and educate the urban workers in Jakarta and its surrounds. _Pos Kota_ tried to address the needs of that particular social stratum by providing information perceived to be of interest to them. The first edition was published after Harmoko, the then editor-in-chief at that time, conducted research in Glodok, Jatinegara, Tanah Abang and Senen—the areas in which most
of the city’s urban workers lived, worked and shopped in and around Jakarta. Based on that research into a potential new market, he published the first edition of *Pos Kota* (Ghazali & Nasution, 2000, p. 8).

For its very first edition in 1970, *Pos Kota* printed 3,500 copies. Circulation increased quickly and the newspaper was printing 30,000 to 60,000 copies in a matter of months (Soebekti, 2000, p. 8). In 2010-2012, the circulation of *Pos Kota* ranged from 500,000 to 600,000 copies per day (*Litbang Grup Pos Kota*, 2011).

As *Pos Kota* is a Jakarta-based newspaper, its primary aim is to cover issues that are happening in Jakarta. This is why the paper has the logo of the National Monument ‘Monas’ (which stands outside the presidential palace) logo -- the symbol of Jakarta -- on its masthead. This logo is located inside the letter ‘O’ in the word ‘KOTA’. However, the newspaper is also distributed to areas that surround Jakarta, and even to areas outside Java. The *Pos Kota* area of distribution is usually called ‘Jabodetabek’, which is an abbreviation of Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang and Bekasi. Jakarta is the capital city of Indonesia. Bogor, Depok, Tangerang and Bekasi are the commuter belts around Jakarta that play an important role in the life of the city. Most people who work in Jakarta live in these areas. Thus, issues occurring in Jakarta have significance to people who live in these cities, and vice versa.

Most *Pos Kota* readers are men with ages ranging from 30 to 49 years of age. However, women also read *Pos Kota*. In 2010, the Nielsen Media Index revealed that there were at least 209,000 women reading *Pos Kota* spanning teenagers, career women or women who were based at home (*Litbang Grup Pos Kota*, 2011). The paper also has a space for children in one of the sections, *Pos Bocah* (‘Toddler’s Post’), which is published every Sunday. In addition, *Pos Kota* has begun to cover national issues in order to attract skilled urban professional workers, such as office workers and public servants, who have slightly higher incomes. *Pos Kota* claims that the paper has become a daily necessity for this particular group (*Litbang Grup Pos Kota*, 2011). The Nielsen Media Index shows that 63% of *Pos Kota* readers have a regular income of Rp. 2,000,000 per month (approximately AUD$210) (as cited in *Litbang Grup Pos Kota*, 2011).

As a tabloid newspaper, *Pos Kota* has some typical features: strong visuals, catchy, informal and easy to read copy, local news focusing on crimes, scandals and sensations, space allocation for advertisements, providing space for the public and communities, and general life guidance as described below.

**Strong visuals**

*Pos Kota* uses big and colourful headlines. These are sometimes red and at other times green, yellow or pink. They are accompanied by engaging pictures or cartoons and a combination of font that is in upper case, italicised and underlined.
Catchy, informal and easy to read copy

*Pos Kota* uses vernacular language in most of its headlines; thus, it is catchy and stimulates people to read further. *Pos Kota* also uses informal and simple diction for its news, which makes the stories easy to read and understandable. For example, one of its headlines in the edition of 24 December 2011 edition was very straightforward and sensational: ‘A 4 months pregnant widow has died after being slaughtered by her new boyfriend’ [translation is by the author]. In addition, *Pos Kota* uses a ‘sneak peek’ style in that the story is begun on the cover and continued on another page.

Local news focusing on crimes, scandals and sensations

The focus of *Pos Kota* is on crime, scandals and sensational issues. In its first year, the paper extensively reported on Cut Zahara Fona, who stated that the baby in her womb could speak and pray (Wirosardjono, 2000, p. 63). Although it was discovered that Cut Zahara Fona had lied to people by hiding a tape-recorder under her clothes, this contributed to a rapid increase in *Pos Kota*’s circulation. *Pos Kota* even admitted that they knew it was a hoax, but chose to continue presenting the story because it was marketable (Wirosardjo, 2000, p. 62). While the paper does report on political and social issues, it mostly chooses scandal and sensation as its focus.

Some sections in *Pos Kota* specifically provide space for the police department, such as the Question and Answer and Polmas sections. This demonstrates that criminal activity has significant news value for *Pos Kota*. In terms of page allocation, crime news is ranked first, followed by local news, national news, celebrity news and advertisements. Crime news is always located on the most accessible pages: pages one, two and three.

When analysed quantitatively based on section allocation, local news ranks in first position, with 36%, which means that 11 of 31 sections in *Pos Kota* are allocated to local news. Sections about crimes and human interest share the same allocation, with 13% each. This
shows that news about crime does not actually dominate the paper’s space. The analysis of the front pages of *Pos Kota* shows that 42% of the copy is devoted to local issues. The importance the paper places on local news is much higher than other categories, such as crime, sport, national politics or celebrity news; this is further evidenced by *Pos Kota*’s stated commitment to be a local newspaper for Jakarta and its surrounds.

*Space allocation for advertisements*

Since its establishment, *Pos Kota* has been committed to serving the local people in Jakarta and its surrounds (Ghazali & Nasution, 2000, p. 2). According to data from Litbang Grup *Pos Kota* (2011), one of the attempts to serve local people is by providing more space for advertisements over editorial copy space. In 2011-2012, the space allocated to advertisements in *Pos Kota* was higher than that allocated to editorial content—59% of *Pos Kota*’s space on Saturdays was devoted to advertisements and 41% to editorial copy.

The advertisements in *Pos Kota* can be divided into two categories: public service and private. The public service advertisements mostly focus on announcements to avoid crime—similar to Crime Stoppers in Australia—while the private advertisements include regular classified and display classified. The advertisements can also be differentiated into goods and service advertisements and job vacancies. Most of the goods and service advertisements contain advertisements about properties, cars, motorcycles, and medicines to overcome sexual problems, while the job vacancy section contains vacancies for unskilled workers, such as drivers, bricklayers and cleaners.

*Providing space for the public and communities*

Realizing that people use newspapers for many reasons and with different motives, *Pos Kota* gives space for ordinary people to be in the paper. Anyone can invite a journalist from *Pos Kota* to write a story about local social activities. Indeed, the main formula of *Pos Kota* is ‘local news’, ‘local people’ and ‘local events’ (Wibisono, 2000, p. 161).

The sections of *Kavling Warga* (‘Family Tales’), *Komunitas* (‘Community’) and *Koran RT/RW* (‘Local District/Council Paper’) are specifically allocated for *Pos Kota* readers who want to be included in the paper. Social activities, such as charities or community services, can be reported in *Pos Kota*. This is one reason that readers have a strong engagement with the paper because *Pos Kota* is one of the few newspapers that publishes such news. There is also special section called *SMS Andai Anda* (‘If only I were texts’), which contains text messages from readers who express their feelings and write comments about recent issues.

*General life guidance*

In addition to giving a space to the public and community, *Pos Kota* also gives some general guidance about daily life, such as dealing with crime, sexual problems and other health issues. There is also a section called *Rohani* that focuses on religious matters. This is an important section for some readers because it offers advice on how to be a good person and how to deal with crimes in an Islamic manner.
**Lampu Hijau**

*Lampu Hijau* (‘Green Light’) is the second, most well known tabloid newspaper in Indonesia. It was first published on 23 November 2001 by PT Cahaya Rakyat Merdeka and was previously called *Lampu Merah* (‘Red Light’). On 18 October 2008, the name was changed to *Lampu Hijau* (‘Green Light’), which was supposed to create a ‘cooler’ image, since the name *Lampu Merah* tended to be perceived as synonymous with crime and sex stories (Interview with the editor-in-chief of *Lampu Hijau*, 25 December 2011). The logo is located between the two words in the masthead. *Lampu Hijau* has the tagline ‘Love, Pren, Piss’, which translated into English means ‘Love, Friendship and Peace’. Nowadays, its readers call it *Lamjo*, which is the abbreviation of *Lampu Hijau*.

![Figure 2. An example of Lampu Hijau's front page.](image)

According to its editor-in-chief, *Lampu Hijau* was established to present comprehensive news about crime to readers in the Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang and Bekasi areas. Unlike *Pos Kota*, *Lampu Hijau* emphasises crime issues not local issues. In addition, *Lampu Hijau* wanted to be close to the local communities in Jakarta and its surrounds, and to bring peace and security to these communities by giving resident readers information on crime hot spots.

The daily circulation of *Lampu Hijau* in July 2011 was 50,000 copies. The highest circulation of 130,000 copies was reached between 2004 to 2006, when it was still using the name *Lampu Merah*. Although its circulation has dropped to an average of 50,000 copies since 2011, *Lampu Hijau* remains successful in terms of circulation and readership.

The area of distribution of *Lampu Hijau* includes Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Bekasi, Tangerang, West Java (Karawang, Purwakarta, Bandung, Tasikmalaya, Garut, Banjar, Ciamis and Cirebon), Banten (Serang, Lebak, Cilegon and Pandeglang) and Lampung (Sumatra Island).
Lampu Hijau’s target readers can be described as 19 to 45 years old and categorised as urban workers. The paper also specifically targets young communities (such as motor clubs and fan clubs). Lampu Hijau is a paper for low-income people, which is why it is sold at a low price—Rp. 2,000 or equal to AUD$0.20. Lampu Hijau tends to use simple words to cater to its readers who are mostly not well educated and have low literacy levels (Interview with the editor-in-chief of Lampu Hijau, 25 December 2011).

Similar to Pos Kota, Lampu Hijau uses some tabloid-specific styles, as described in the following section.

**Strong visuals**

According to the editor-in-chief, colourful headlines and engaging pictures are the main strengths of Lampu Hijau. Its headlines, which use a combination of upper case, underlining and italics, are eye-catching. In addition, Lampu Hijau uses unusual formats for its titles, such as snippets of conversation or bullet points. The paper often uses rhymes as well as local slang, which make the titles very catchy.

![Figure 3. Some editions of Lampu Hijau from December 2011 and January 2012.](image)

**Catchy, informal and easy to read.**

Lampu Hijau uses vernacular language in most of its headlines, but it uses more serious and formal language for social and political news, particularly in the Metro Jabodetabek section. Lampu Hijau also often uses very long headlines (up to 40 words), and tends to ignore the grammatical rules of Bahasa Indonesia. For example, its headline on 1 December 2011 read:

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Asked to go to the Mosque, a girl hasn’t returned to her house for three days. She was kidnapped by her ex boyfriend and raped by her ex and his 2 friends. One friend admitted he raped her once, another friend admitted he raped her twice, while her ex did not admit yet because he is still on the run.
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In addition, *Lampu Hijau* often uses metaphors and anecdotes in their titles to allow readers to get an idea of the stories quickly and easily. The paper also uses local daily jargon to create familiarity with its readers. Furthermore, *Lampu Hijau* uses an unusual form of censorship. The image will be covered by black boxes that include comments from the editor or editor-in-chief. These act as censor mechanisms. More details of this can be found in Figure 4.

![Image](image1.png)

**Figure 4.** The ‘censor mechanism’ in *Lampu Hijau*.

The yellow sentences in the black box translate as, ‘This has been censored by the editor-in-chief’. These boxes are the censor mechanisms of *Lampu Hijau*. This form of censorship can always be found in the international celebrity news, but is not used for the crime news.

*Local news focusing on crimes*

Analysis of the front page reveals that *Lampu Hijau* gives more space to crime issues than *Pos Kota* does. During the research period, the front page of *Lampu Hijau* was dominated by crime news, with 46% of all news articles reporting crime, while local news was in second position, with 25% of the total news articles. However, 66.5% of *Lampu Hijau*’s back page was dominated by local news, with no crime items at all. Thus, similar to *Pos Kota*, *Lampu Hijau* is committed its stated goal of to being a local newspaper and focusing on local issues. Specifically, in the case of *Lampu Hijau*, the paper focuses on local crime-related issues.

*Large allotment of space for advertisement*

Advertisements are found on every page in *Lampu Hijau*. The paper has advertorials as well as ‘Iklan Baris’—classified advertisements. On a weekly basis, advertisements occupy 43% of each page in *Lampu Hijau*. Most of the advertisements address readers with lower incomes. The advertisements concentrate on products such as ring tones for mobile telephones, motorcycles, utility vehicles, supplements for sexual vitality, sexual therapy, and matchmaker
websites, and traditional medicines. At the time of research, there were also several political campaigns in progress because Jakarta was about to hold its gubernatorial election; thus, the paper also presented political advertisements.

Providing space for the public

*Lampu Hijau* gives space for its readers to be in the newspaper—through true story sections, personal greetings and public opinion spaces. There are subsections in the *KomBes* section that are specifically designed to provide space for readers. These contain pictures of readers, greetings and quizzes.

It appears *Lampu Hijau* realises that most of its readers are workers who come from villages or rural areas. They are used to unmediated communication and want to catch up on recent gossip, scandals and local issues through social channels such as gatherings or meetings. Thus, they use *Lampu Hijau* as a replacement for their traditional social channels, which creates a strong bond between *Lampu Hijau* and its readers.

*Lampu Hijau* also has two subsections on its front page that cover community issues. These sections provide a space for local communities to be in the media. It is no wonder that the tagline for one of the subsections is ‘*berani narsis, biar eksis*’, which means ‘it is fine to be a little narcissistic in order to exist in the media’.

General life guidance

*Lampu Hijau* has a specific section that includes general life guidance, particularly relating to sexual and psychological problems. This section is called *Seksitainment* and is located on page six. It includes consultation with experts and personal stories.

Findings: *Pos Kota* and *Lampu Hijau* as newspapers for urban workers

Wasserman (2010) articulated one of the perspectives from which to consider the phenomenon of tabloid journalism, ‘as an extension of [the] move toward market-driven (as opposed to explicitly ideologically motivated) media ... [that is] set on extracting as much profit as possible from the communities they cater to’ (p. 3). In the case of *Pos Kota*, it can be argued that the commitment to serve the urban workers is based on profit calculation rather than any idealistic goals.

When *Pos Kota* was founded in 1970, mainstream newspapers only focused on Indonesian national politics. In addition, due to rapid development in Jakarta, many people were attracted to move to Jakarta to work as unskilled workers. This socioeconomic shift had an immense effect on the media’s target markets. *Pos Kota* was aware of this change in demographic and realised that it had good prospects for business. Thus, the decision to target urban workers who were previously ignored by the mainstream media can be seen as a smart move by *Pos Kota*’s founders to cater to a new, promising market. The editor-in-chief of *Pos Kota* testified that there were two reasons behind the decision to target urban workers as *Pos
Kota readers. The first was commercial, and the second was based on a service-orientated factor, as denoted in his statement:

*Pos Kota* focuses on the urban workers since they are the highest percentage of people who live in Jakarta and surrounds, and also because this group needs media to give them access and information so that they can increase the quality of their lives (Interview with *Pos Kota* editor-in-chief, 7 August 2012).

The editor and journalists described the aims of *Pos Kota* as both commercial and idealistic. One of the journalists depicted the mission of *Pos Kota* as follows: ‘Just like any other publication, *Pos Kota* wants to be a reliable newspaper as well as to earn increasing profit for the company’ (Interview with journalist 1 of *Pos Kota*, 25 December 2011). However, the paper does not employ the two missions—commercial and idealistic—equally. The space allocated to advertisements during the research period was higher than that given to editorial content. This data can be perceived as evidence that the paper’s commercial success is considered more important than its role of serving the public. Furthermore, data from *Litbang Grup Pos Kota* (2011) says that the paper is proud to be the main reference on car pricing, thus emphasising its information role in a commercial context. This circumstance reflects the influence of market factors on *Pos Kota*, which affect the paper’s operation as a business—a standard contemporary practice, as noted by McQuail (2003): ‘Communications and the media are now predominantly, if not primarily, run as business organisations’ (p. 233).

As urban workers over the past four decades have become the biggest reader group of *Pos Kota*, the paper has made a more conscious effort to ‘maintain’ this market. As the editor-in-chief described: ‘We devote our paper to the urban workers since they are our loyal readers. We are committed to taking care of them and helping them to solve their problems’ (Interview with *Pos Kota* editor-in-chief, 7 August 2012). In order to enable the urban workers to be heard, *Pos Kota* created a specific section to allow the urban readers to discuss their grievances, as the editor-in-chief explained:

*Pos Kota* wants to be a paper, which is able to connect the public with the government. It is not only about socialisation or education, but also finding solutions to current problems or issues. That is why *Pos Kota* has a section named *Aspirasi Warga* ['public aspiration'] to accommodate the aspirations of public in Jakarta and surrounds. We follow up any aspiration from the public, confirm it to some sources, then publish it in the paper so the readers would know that their aspirations are not being neglected. *Pos Kota* believes that it has a moral responsibility to help educate the public through coverage of issues that answer their needs (Interview with *Pos Kota* editor-in-chief, 7 August 2012).

*Pos Kota* has a section entitled ‘Public Aspiration’ and its readers are active in this forum. However, in the case of a public desire for influence on the local government’s policy, for example, when urban workers write aspirational letters to *Pos Kota* and the paper publishes them, do these actually reach the people in charge? In other words, will the
governor read and listen to this kind of ‘aspiration’? This question remains open, as Pos Kota does not provide any section that contains the responses from local government officials to these letters.

Despite the fact that the commitment to serve urban workers in Jakarta and its surrounds was primarily a commercial decision, Pos Kota tries seriously to make the paper suitable for urban workers. This is most clearly seen in its role as a local paper, as expressed by a Pos Kota journalist: ‘The paper is always concerned with local issues such as crime, fire, flood, traffic and so on. We believe that this kind of news is important for people who live in Jakarta and surrounds’ (Interview with journalist 1 of Pos Kota, 25 December 2011).

Local news is certainly the main topic of Pos Kota. However, this does not necessarily mean that any local issues can be published in the paper. According to the editor of Pos Kota, only local issues that relate to wider public issues, such as a new policy on fuel prices, are those covered by Pos Kota. Moreover, for local news relating to crimes, the news item has to meet three requirements:

First, it has to involve many people or broad society. Second, it has to have an element of the new so we need to cover it as part of warning or prevention mechanism. Third, it has to be in relation to a public figure (Interview with Pos Kota editor-in-chief, 7 August 2012).

Another attempt to accommodate the needs of the urban workers appears in the use of the distinctive style and vernacular language used in Pos Kota. As the editor stated: ‘The unusual layout, the concise stories and the distinctive style are nothing more than Pos Kota’s attempts to meet the reader’s expectation’ (Interview with Pos Kota editor-in-chief, 7 August 2012). The statement ‘to meet the reader’s expectation’ can be also read as ‘to gain profit for the paper’. It is evident that the paper is comfortable dwelling on drama and sensationalism as long as this is marketable.

Interestingly, the editor of Pos Kota said that the paper was not concerned with such criticisms. He stated that ‘time has revealed that Pos Kota has a distinctive style that people cannot resist. After all, many media, including television, have followed the style of Pos Kota’. Indeed, Pos Kota has become a trendsetter for the tabloid genre in Indonesian journalism. One journalist claimed that for crime news, Pos Kota is the ‘guru’ for all media: ‘We are the trendsetters for crime news. Many media follow our style’ (Interview with journalist 2 of Pos Kota, 25 December 2011).

In addition to that, the editor-in-chief of Lampu Hijau described the demographic profile of the target readers as follows: ‘The target readers of Lampu Hijau are the urban workers who are still in the productive age, around 19 to 45 years old, with little to medium financial capacity’ (Interview with the editor-in-chief of Lampu Hijau, 25 December 2011). He emphasised: ‘Lampu Hijau wants to be the main newspaper for the urban workers to get any information related to crimes, entertainment, sex education and so on’ (Interview with the editor-in-chief of Lampu Hijau, 25 December 2011).
Similar to Pos Kota, Lampu Hijau also has two ‘paradoxical’ aims: to serve its target readers and to advance its market position. The decision to be a local newspaper is also based on profit consideration because, at the time of its founding, not many newspapers addressed this reader segment and these topics. As a journalist stated: ‘Lampu Hijau focuses on crimes, local politics or local issues and sexual issues since they are still rarely reported’ (Interview with the journalist 2 of Lampu Hijau, 13 August 2012). For the same reasons, Lampu Hijau also focuses on funny and weird stories: ‘Distinctive stories also become our interest since they are actually marketable though often ignored by other media’ (Interview with journalist 3 of Lampu Hijau, 13 August 2012). The effort to win further market segments is the underlying reason for an attempt to accommodate all circles of urban workers. As one Lampu Hijau journalist said: ‘We target all workers in Jakarta, not only unskilled workers but also public servants. We have the sections to accommodate all of them; however, the portion for unskilled workers is higher’ (Interview with journalist 1 of Lampu Hijau, 17 December 2011). By attempting to accommodate all strata of urban workers, the paper can make itself ever more profitable.

In an attempt to carve out its own readership and distinguish itself, Lampu Hijau has chosen to focus on crime. By selecting this narrow scope, it minimises competition with other newspapers, including Pos Kota. The editor-in-chief stated:

The birth of Lampu Merah [the previous name of Lampu Hijau] was started with the commitment to create a very segmented newspaper. Many segments were being considered at that time, but finally we decided to focus on crime since there is no newspaper that fully covers this issue. Indonesian readers, especially urban workers, were mostly ignorant about the crime information, even though crime is an inevitable part of the daily urban lives … By providing comprehensive information about crime, I believe we will help to create a more safe and secure feeling in our society (Interview with the editor-in-chief of Lampu Hijau, 25 December 2011).

‘Crime issues have been the main topic in Lampu Hijau from its beginning’ (Interview with journalist 1 of Lampu Hijau, 17 December 2011). Indeed, Lampu Hijau seeks to play a significant role in preventing crimes. One of the journalists reasoned that the function of the paper is ‘to make people realise that crime can happen anywhere at any time to anyone. Lampu Hijau tries to encourage its readers to be aware of this’ (Interview with journalist 3 of Lampu Hijau, 13 August 2012). Another Lampu Hijau journalist supported this by saying: ‘People need to be aware of any crime that might happen to them or their beloved ones. For that reason, Lampu Hijau tries its best to provide its readers with accurate and comprehensive crime news’ (Interview with journalist 2 of Lampu Hijau, 13 August 2012).

By focusing on crime issues, Lampu Hijau has become a specialised newspaper, and is thus able to face intense competition after the 1998 period of political reform that signified the beginning of a democratic era in Indonesia. The momentum of the 1998 reform has significantly influenced the development of journalism in Indonesia, especially since the passing of The Act of the Republic Indonesia No. 40 in 1999, concerning the press. This act
marked the establishment of press freedom in Indonesia, which has led to enormous growth in Indonesian journalism. At the end of the New Order (the era before the 1998 reform), only 289 publications had a license to publish (Romano, 2003, p. 35); however, soon after the reform, the number of publications in Indonesia had reached the thousands. According to the data from Direktorat Pembinaan Pers, on 23 September 1999, the number of print media in Indonesia — which included newspapers, tabloids, magazines and bulletins — reached 1,678 publications (cited in Yusuf, 2009, p. 1). Under pressure from market competition, Lampu Hijau sought what Bennet (2003) called ‘audience-grabbing stories on short deadlines with scarce resources’ (p. 3). On a daily basis, each journalist of Lampu Hijau is required to submit at least three stories about local and crime issues. Thus, sensational stories become their main preference because these are popular, profitable, cheap and easy to cover (McChesney, 2008, p. 46).

Based on the assumption that urban workers are less educated, Lampu Hijau turns complex subjects into copy that is easy to understand by using daily jargon, simple phrases and easy diction. In nearly all of Lampu Hijau’s sections, the paper uses vernacular language, strong visuals and anecdotes or jargon to make the content more easily understood by readers. As stated by a journalist, ‘The style and the format of Lampu Hijau are very attractive and suitable for its target readers because they are easy to “digest”’ (Interview with journalist 3 of Lampu Hijau, 13 August 2012). Undeniably, the journalists and editors believe that their style is appropriate for their target readers. One of the journalists confirmed that she wants to keep the style of the paper: ‘I don’t want to change anything. This is the unique characteristic of Lampu Hijau’ (Interview with journalist 1 of Lampu Hijau, 17 December 2011).

Consequently, Lampu Hijau often receives negative judgement and criticism regarding its layout and writing style, which relies on dramatisation and sensationalism. One of the major accusations is that Lampu Hijau is too sexually explicit: ‘Many people think that Lampu Hijau is a porn[ographic] newspaper. For me, it is completely a misinterpretation. Reporting about sexual issues does not equal to porn, does it?’ (Interview with journalist 3 of Lampu Hijau, 13 August 2012). Lampu Hijau is struggling with its image in this respect. One of the journalists admitted that it is difficult to overcome the image of Lampu Hijau: ‘Lampu Hijau is still considered as a porn newspaper for some people. The paper finds that it is difficult to get out from that image’ (Interview with journalist 2 of Lampu Hijau, 13 August 2012).

The image as a pornographic newspaper stems from the paper always reports about rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and so on, and places these stories on the front page. This, of course, is also part of its marketing strategy. Lampu Hijau uses the global formula for tabloid headlines, which, according to Wasserman (2010) are ‘brightly coloured ... printed in big capital letters and often underlined, italicised, or with an exclamation mark adding emphasis, [the headlines] scream out a sensational bit of news across the whole of the front page’ (p. 43).

Actually, Lampu Hijau has made some efforts to move away from its image as a pornographic newspaper. When shifting from its old name, Lampu Merah, to the new name,
Lampu Hijau, the newspaper received a makeover and was supposed to become more elegant and ‘soft’ in terms of style. According to the editor-in-chief, the layout, headlines, sections, pictures and writing style of Lampu Hijau were supposed to become different from Lampu Merah, which historically were distinctly vulgar and sensational. However, ultimately, Lampu Hijau had to keep its sensational style because the paper found this was more appealing to its target readers. The editor reasoned: ‘We have to be realistic and consider what is most suitable for our readers who are mostly urban workers. It is a market requirement we cannot escape’ (Interview with the editor-in-chief of Lampu Hijau, 25 December 2011). On one hand, this confirms the commitment of Lampu Hijau to align with what is suitable for its target readers. On the other hand, it indicates the vulnerability of the paper to market forces, as described by Keeble (2001), ‘economic pressure becomes a justification to sacrifice standards of significance, depth, and diversity, for insider viewpoints, scandals, violence, sex, the invasion of privacy of individuals and sensationalism’ (p. 61).

Discussion: Tabloid newspapers as an urban phenomenon

Tabloid journalism in Indonesia characterises newspapers that focus on local issues, especially crimes, local incidents and sensationalised stories. It targets urban workers who have moved to the capital (Jakarta and its surrounds) from rural villages and who use the newspapers as a replacement for their traditional media to find out about recent gossip, scandals, rumours and local issues. It also targets urban workers who do not come from rural villages, but whose social networks have been disrupted due to their high workload in Jakarta and its surrounds. For that reason, tabloid newspapers in Indonesia have attained success in Jakarta because the city is the most popular urban destination of their target readers who come from rural villages and miss the social or unmediated communication they previously experienced. Attempts to begin tabloid newspapers in other Indonesian cities have failed. These tabloid newspapers—even though they tried to apply a similar formula to Pos Kota and Lampu Hijau, such as relying on locality and distinctive style—were not successful. For example, Surya and Memorandum failed in Surabaya, East Java, even though this is the second-largest city in Indonesia, with over 2.7 million inhabitants (Wibisono, 2000, p. 164).

One explanation for this is that people in Surabaya, Yogyakarta and other cities in Indonesia do not need tabloid journalism because they have not experienced the same level of social disruption that characterizes the wider Jakarta area. They do not need these alternatives to traditional communication and media because their daily lives are still full of social engagement. Besides, cities other than Jakarta are not the focus of urbanization. In the other cities, there are more choices of media because people are less frequently trapped in traffic jams or may not need to commute daily, thereby lacking the contextual circumstances in which a tabloid readership might arise. This circumstance also verifies that tabloid journalism is a fit-for-context phenomenon, which means that different contexts may lead to different kinds of tabloid journalism. In this case, tabloid journalism in Indonesia is a phenomenon that only fits the context of urban life in Jakarta and its surrounds.
This circumstance leads to the conclusion that, in Indonesia, the tabloid newspaper is an urban phenomenon. However, the concept of urban, here, only refers to Jakarta and its commuter belts (Bekasi, Tangerang, Bogor and Depok) because these cities have special characteristics as a consequence of urbanization—spatially and culturally—and are thus different from other cities in Indonesia.

Like other cities in developing countries, the urban population in Jakarta and its surrounds is growing significantly due to massive urbanization. Jakarta and its commuter belts are flooded by people from rural areas in all parts of Indonesia in search of work. According to Giddens (2006), economic reasons are the background of urbanization: ‘People are drawn to cities in the developing world either because their traditional systems of rural production have disintegrated, or because the urban areas offer superior job opportunity’ (p. 919). In addition, Tyner (2003) argues that ‘Jakarta’s population is also impacted by seasonal and daily commuting. Hundreds of thousands of workers, the majority of whom live in the Jabodetabek [Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang and Bekasi] region commute daily to Jakarta’ (p. 391).

As a consequence of the amount of time spent commuting, urban workers in Jakarta are forced to commit the majority of their time to employment since ‘most contacts between city dwellers are fleeting and partial, and are means to other ends, rather than being satisfying relationships in themselves’ (Wirth, as cited in Giddens, 2006, p. 898). In addition, according to Siregar (2000, p. 43), urban workers in Jakarta barely have social lives. They are too busy to lead the ‘normal’ lives they used to have in their rural backgrounds.

In Jakarta, workers often have to live separately from their family and their community, which makes it difficult for them to maintain social and cultural ties. As Giddens (2006) argues: ‘despite the rich opportunities that big cities offer, many people find them lonely or unfriendly places’ (p. 894). Furthermore, in Jakarta and its supporting cities, relationship is transitory and instrumental (Giddens, 2006, p. 896). Thus, tabloid newspapers can fill the emptiness of daily life.

Tabloid newspapers also help people understand and learn about the Jakarta milieu. *Pos Kota* and *Lampu Hijau* have been found to help urban workers in Jakarta learn about the place in which they live by providing them with information and gossip relating to their urban lives.

**Conclusion**

The term ‘tabloid’ in Indonesia is often perceived as referring to the format of the newspaper, which is smaller than a broadsheet newspaper. There is no concept of ‘tabloid journalism’ in Indonesia; instead, most people call this form of newspaper a ‘crime newspaper’ or ‘pornographic newspaper’. Despite such judgmental labels, tabloid journalism in Indonesia has actually played an important role in creating a new market for newspaper consumption. Tabloid journalism in Indonesia has created an opportunity for everyday people to become newspaper readers.
Unsurprisingly, in addition to serving these as yet ‘untouched’ readers, tabloid newspapers in Indonesia also belong to large conglomerates that, according to Wasserman (2010, p. 3), exploit their readers for commercial purposes. Thus, ‘their poor and working-class audiences remain merely a market to be tapped’ (Wasserman, 2010, p. 30). The choice to be a local newspaper and to use crude and salacious headlines on the front and back page is made for marketing purposes, as was admitted by the journalists and the editors of Pos Kota and Lampu Hijau during the interviews.

In response to such criticisms, both Pos Kota and Lampu Hijau editorial boards, always take cover under the shield that it is the urban worker’s taste. They state that their readers’ taste ‘forces’ them to publish sensationalized stories. However, in most cases, taste is a construction, which means that taste can be constructed through limited choice and regular exposure. It is the tabloid newspaper, itself, that creates this particular taste for the urban workers. As Anwar (2000) argues, ‘people might not really like it [a tabloid newspaper], but after all they got used to it’ (p. 27). Thus, their justifications can be seen more as a side effect than a main purpose like Wasserman (2010) claims: ‘If they [tabloids] manage to contribute to the good of society in the process, this might be seen as a positive spin-off rather than the main aim’ (p. 3).

Having said that, to simply ignore or downgrade this kind of journalism within the Indonesian print media landscape represents a narrow-minded perspective. This kind of journalism will always there and develops as long as the market is existed, and tabloids present value to their target readers. As an alternative, tabloid journalism could be reinvented in a way that ‘preserves its best elements, subtracts the worst and still glows’ (Shafer, 2009). In this case, tabloid journalism in Indonesia could be reinvented by remaining local in terms of the issues it discusses instead of dwelling on drama and sensationalism.

Reference


Jakarta, Indonesia: Litbang Grup Pos Kota.


