

Just an ordinary journalist

My revolution to being considered a member of the media is growing. I am part of one medium — the newspaper.

My responsibilities, my role and my accountability are restricted to this medium. I will answer for my sins and foibles but not for those of others.

Fellow editors in India and Asia — dear friends all — tell me of the inevitability of media convergence and chide me for being antediluvian.

They say the modern newsroom requires people skilled not just in fact-gathering and writing; headlining and editing, but also in podcasting, broadcasting, tweeting and heavens know what else. That to me sounds like Indian restaurants of yesteryears — they offered Chinese, Continental, Thai and Mughlai



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cuisines from a single wok and made a hash of them all.

I am entitled to my view but you will ask why I am unburdening myself now. The reason is that something very sad happened a few days ago. This event, coming on the back of a string of others, forced me to organize my thoughts on why I ought to remain a plain and simple journalist, and not allow membership of the much-hyped club called the media to be thrust upon me.

A 20-year-old girl, student of a prestigious college in Delhi and daughter of a man who lost his life in an India-Pakistan border conflict when she was 2, said in

a video posted on social media, "Pakistan did not kill my dad, war did."

That is a profound thought, one that every sensible person ought to reflect upon. It is a thought that deserves introspection and informed articulation, especially in these ultra-nationalistic times. It should open minds, not close them further. It does not deserve derision or hate or the threat of violence. But that is what it got.

For her poignant appeal to good sense, Gurmehar Kaur was trolled, hounded, threatened with rape, labeled a Maoist and a separatist, and suffered the mortification of being told by a junior minister that her father's soul must be weeping "because she was being misguided by those who celebrate on the bodies of martyrs."

Rattled by the rabidity of responses, Gurmehar withdrew

from the public space in tears. A brave and spirited girl I would be proud to call my daughter was forced to cower. All that I and many like me could do was watch helplessly as the deluge of hate swamped our world. The media was at work, and to think they call it social.

Convergence would make me a part of this horror.

Gurmehar Kaur's case was special but by no means unique from the perspective of labeling. A few days earlier, at a "media" conclave, I was questioned by members of the audience.

They asked me why the media was so irresponsible; why it sensationalized events; why it found little or no space for the other side of the story and why it conducted trials and played the role of judge, jury and executioner. I was shaken by the degree of antipathy.

Partly to gain time and gather

my thoughts, I asked my interrogators to provide examples.

The examples came thick and fast. They supported each of the charges, sometimes conclusively. *Culpa, maxima culpa!* But it had nothing to do with me. Each charge was exemplified by an excess of a television anchor or a Twitter user, members of that grandly-titled media of which I was alleged to be a part. I pleaded not guilty and cited my watertight alibi. For my pains, one person accused me of chickening out on a technicality.

This is the reason the narrative must be rewritten and the lines redrawn so that members of the Press can extricate themselves from this oversized cloak called the media into which they are being squeezed.

We are inheritors of a glorious legacy and bound by the rigors of a demanding craft. We are not hoodlums who threaten to rape

or maim those we don't like or shout out those we disagree with. The best of us err, sometimes grievously, but have learnt that making amends can be uplifting.

Those on social and other media — be they presidents, prime ministers, ministers, television anchors or citizens of the world — who are prepared to subject themselves to the standards we aim for should join us. They too must strive for the truth, aim to keep the discourse even-tempered, find space for all sides of a story and have the ability to admit mistakes.

But if they cannot do so, let them be members of the media and leave us journalists in peace, even if it is to be the peace of an ethereal grave that Twitter and Facebook dig for us.

The writer is editor of The Statesman, India.

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YOUR LETTERS

Zoos are animal prisons

We'd like to say thank you to 14-year-old author Elysa Ng not only for recognizing that zoos are moneymaking facilities that prioritize profit — not animal welfare — but also for stating an obvious fact that many adults fail to acknowledge: Zoos are nothing more than cruel animal prisons (see "Penguin Restaurant Puts Spotlight on Zoo Controversy," *The Jakarta Post*, Feb. 23).

We learn nothing from watching depressed, frustrated captive animals who are denied everything that's natural and important to them. Animal attractions send confusing messages about animal behavior, natural history and conservation, and they leave visitors with the damaging notion that animals are here for our entertainment. Parents who want to teach their children about animals can watch a documentary, go to a museum, or observe animals in their natural habitat.

Elysa's compassion for animals is remarkable. If all teenagers shared her kindness, our future would be very bright indeed.

JASON BAKER
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PEOPLE FOR THE ETHICAL TREATMENT OF ANIMALS (PETA) ASIA
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Expatriates and the Tax Amnesty Law

Most expatriates, working or retired, in Indonesia and in possession of a valid tax number (NPWP) are extremely confused and worried about the applicability of the Tax Amnesty Law.

Expatriates working in Indonesia are subject to income tax on their local earnings but according to the law as written they would not only have to report all assets owned abroad but also pay fines for late or non-reporting.

More often than not expatriate professionals already own assets such as housing or financial investments earned and taxed abroad prior to taking up professional assignments in Indonesia.

The law does not seem to differentiate between Indonesian and non-Indonesian taxpayers and needs to be clarified quickly.

Requiring expatriates to pay a fine of up to 10 percent on offshore assets, albeit with tax credits for taxes already paid abroad, would in all likelihood result in an exodus of qualified expatriate professionals from Indonesia.

As things stand, income from offshore assets, excluding any tax credits, would be taxable in Indonesia, a country that also requires complicated tax filing paper work. This would represent a serious deterrent for foreign professionals considering assignments or work opportunities in Indonesia.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the situation, I consulted several tax consultants who were equally confused why resident foreigners with a NPWP would be treated like Indonesian taxpayers who own offshore assets.

I also discussed the tax amnesty situation with a number of expatriates. The response varied from confusion and incomprehension to outright panic.

In order to avoid further panic or confusion among retirees or the 75,000 legal work permit holders, tax authorities need to clarify the tax status of expatriates and issue updates or amendments as needed.

JOE SPARTZ
JAKARTA

Malaysia has reasons to challenge Kim

Adam Minter
BLOOMBERG VIEW

It didn't take long for Malaysia to retaliate against North Korea for barring its citizens from leaving the country on Tuesday. Within hours, a security cordon had surrounded North Korea's Malaysian Embassy to prevent diplomatic staff from leaving.

The response may not be legal under international law, but it's certainly understandable. North Korea is not only accused of sponsoring an assassination in Malaysia's busiest airport, using a banned nerve agent. It's since taunted and bullied Malaysian officials attempting to investigate the crime.

But Malaysia's aggressive response isn't just about the assassination. Its roots trace back to the flurry of criticism roused by the government's response to the loss of Malaysia Airlines flight 370, three years ago today.

Embarrassed at home and abroad, the Malaysian government found itself in a political

crisis largely of its own making. In recovering, it appears to have learned some important lessons it's now applying to North Korea.

It's important to remember that the current standoff is out of keeping with Malaysia's diplomatically accommodating past. Non-alignment and non-interference have long been treasured principles; the country has balanced carefully between the United States and China.

The approach has yielded material gains, as well as stability. Having reinstated diplomatic ties with China in 1974, for instance, long before most countries, Malaysia has greatly benefited from Chinese investment and other economic opportunities.

Before the current crisis, Malaysia was among the more open countries in the world to North Korean travelers and businessmen (to a fault, allegedly). But the Pyongyang regime's response to Malaysia's investigation into the murder of Kim Jong-nam, half-brother of North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un, hit an especially sensitive nerve.

In the wake of the March 2014 disappearance of MH370, the Malaysian government, unaccustomed to being questioned aggressively by international media, much less local journalists, was accused of being evasive and even condescending in press briefings. For many Malaysians, global ridicule wasn't even the worst of it.

As the full scope of missed opportunities, errors and diplomatic indignities in the tracking and subsequent search for MH370 accumulated in press accounts, public opinion turned against a government that was already struggling for support after an unexpectedly close election.

Malaysia has continued to suffer in international esteem in the years since the MH370 disappearance. Most notably, the government's response to allegations of financial malfeasance at the government-owned IMDB investment fund have inspired widespread criticism abroad, as well as multiple investigations.

All of this seems to have encouraged the government to

be much more transparent and forthcoming about its investigation into the Kim assassination, holding multiple press conferences and answering questions robustly. If it needed any more spine-stiffening, it had only to peruse Malaysian social media, which quickly took offense to North Korea's provocative, deceitful and even intimidating statements.

Of course, it's much easier for Malaysia to push back against bullying from North Korea than from China. But the mere fact that North Korea's aggressive rhetoric was addressed quickly and with tangible actions has quieted many of the critical voices that had spoken up during past crises.

For the Malaysian government, which is expected to call elections later this year, that's in itself a victory. Hopefully, it's also created room for both sides now to climb down from their current standoff.

The writer is a Bloomberg View columnist.

US-Australia defense ties not a threat to Indonesia

Wibawanto Nugroho
EXETER, UK

The United States Air Force has just deployed a squadron of Lockheed Martin F-22 jet fighters to Australia, the southern neighbor of Indonesia. Within the next few weeks, Australia will also receive a new F-35 fleet from the US.

In its statement the Pentagon said the specific purpose of the deployment was for a joint training exercise with Australia, but it could be perceived as an integral part of the US bid to maintain its dominance in the Pacific theatre against a rising China.

Of seven defense collective arrangements the US has signed with its allies, five are in the Pacific region.

The US Pacific-based defense treaties involve Australia and New Zealand (since 1951), the Philippines (since 1951), Southeast Asia (since 1954) without Indonesia due to its free-and-active foreign policy, Japan (since 1960) and South Korea

(since 1953).

The Indonesian defense community has given mixed responses to the deployment of US jets to Australia, which will add to the existing presence of US Marines Corps in Darwin.

While some perceive the phenomenon as a potential and real threat to Indonesia, others see it through an ideal lens and the rest watch the phenomenon using a constructive lens.

The first group's perspective is shaped by the Realist school, which holds that the international system is basically a collection of states in ceaseless competition, thus conflict is inevitable.

This group is always suspicious of any collective military-power show of force surrounding Indonesia and perceives Indonesia's free and active foreign policy as a vulnerable point in the reality of international security affairs.

The second group follows the Idealist school that emphasizes the structure of the environment in which competition takes place

rather than just emphasizing the relative power of nations and their desire for more of it.

For them conflict and competition are not inevitable and thus such institutions like US defense arrangements in the Pacific can ameliorate or exacerbate the quest for power and security depending upon how treaties are executed.

They tend to have an optimistic outlook, and usually know how to use the US defense arrangements in the region for the maximum benefit of Indonesia's interests rather than being paranoid.

The third group constitutes the constructivists, who maintain that states do not merely conform to Realist or Idealist patterns of behavior because neither power nor international institutions are most significant in determining behavior.

Instead, they contend that nations change behavior depending on their identity as determined by both internal and external conditions, including politics,

ethnicity, culture and history.

For these reasons, I view from a constructivist position the recent strengthening of US military presence in the Pacific theatre, including in Australia.

We, Indonesians, must live with the historical heritage of a free and active foreign policy that does not allow us to sign any military alliance.

We therefore must be keen in perceiving the dynamics of global security affairs and act accordingly based on extraordinary wisdom and creativity in order to take advantage of any power-contest pattern among states (i.e. US vs China) as well as security institutions (i.e. the five US defense arrangements in the Pacific) surrounding our nation.

That said, Indonesia should think and act constructively in response to the implementation of the US-Australia defense treaty.

The combination of challenges caused by our free and active foreign policy and foreign states'

dynamic collective engagements in the region must be answered directly by Indonesia.

If Indonesia consistently upholds its foreign policy doctrine, there is no better options for it other than to think, view and act constructively in the dynamic reality of international security surrounding it.

Such dynamics should be seen more as an opportunity than a threat, more optimistically than pessimistically.

Indonesia must keep the implementation of its free and active foreign policy updated with the reality and the likely future state of international security challenges.

In fact, the US has communicated with the Indonesian Military (TNI) and Defense Ministry about its deployment to Australia.

It is for this reason that the TNI does not view this security development as a threat and will not deploy any troops to patrol the area adjacent to site of the joint exercise.

Instead, the TNI and Defense Ministry have been very effective in how they have engaged and embraced the US to the point where the superpower has become the main provider of military training and assistance to Indonesia.

In this sense, both the US and Indonesia view each other not as enemies, but mutual partners.

It is indeed for the same reason that Indonesia should perceive other competing states in the region, including China, not as foes but as constructivist partners for the maximum benefit of Indonesian national interests.

This is the real consequence of our free and active foreign policy and Indonesia must live with that.

The writer is PhD candidate with the University of Exeter in United Kingdom, an Indonesian International fellow with the US National Defense University and a Fulbright scholar.