

“The Lapindo Case” by Mainstream Media¹

Anton Novenanto²

Sociology Department, Brawijaya University, Malang

Abstract

The author explores the discourse of Lapindo case in the mainstream media: how it is constructed and how it impacts the victims (as a group of the audience). Starting with the analysis on how *a*) the media ownership and market influence, *b*) the journalist's routine and *c*) the editorial policy, contribute in the news making process. Finally, this article shows that the *disasters* occurred in the society are not only caused by the physical cause (the mudflow), but also triggered by the media discourse about the case.

Keywords: Lapindo Case, media effect, constructing news, disaster

Before 29 May 2006, nobody ever expected what would happen in Porong after that day. A small gas leak in Renokenongo, a paddy village, turned into a mud volcano. About 150-200 meters from that point, in Banjar-Panji 1 well, there was oil-drilling activities by Lapindo Brantas Inc. Nowadays, the mud has covered more than seven villages in Porong district. This mud volcano is not merely a unique natural phenomenon; this becomes a kind of socio-environmental disaster.

Disasters, in any cases, have not only destroyed physical space in which people live, but this also affects the social space, since “disasters signal the failure of a society to adapt successfully to certain features of its natural and socially constructed environment in a suitable fashion (Oliver - Smith, 1996:303).” In disasters, society is being tested, whether they will survive or not from the disasters. Disasters might strengthen solidarity or, in contrast, raise conflicts within the society. In some cases, disasters uncover shields that hide society's problems which never emerged before. Some societies, however, were never trained to handle these problems. The East Java mud volcano, however, is an extraordinary phenomenon not only for the East Javanese, but also for Indonesians in general. This phenomenon attracts both national and international media. Since the beginning, it was obvious that the eruptions might not be stopped in a short period of time. Some geologists predict that the eruption will occur for the next 30 years. Despite the fact that the impacts of the mud volcano are growing bigger and worse day-by-day, this incident might be the worst natural phenomenon in the world. This disaster threatens thousands of families in Porong, affects the East Java economy, leads to national development plan, and even reveals high political scandal within the government.

In previous studies of East Java mud volcano calamity, this incident has become politically appealing because there are different versions of the cause, the nature of the disaster and the solutions needed to remedy the situation. Akbar (2007) argues the real disaster begins when the national government tried to shield the oil company, Lapindo Brantas. Public attention simply focused on the ambiguous position of the largest shareholders of Lapindo, Aburizal Bakrie, who, at the same time, is the coordinating minister of people's welfare in the recent cabinet. Schiller *et al.* (2008) state that the efforts of Lapindo, governmental and nongovernmental organizations —are largely uncoordinated and tend to be unfocused, so these have not fulfilled the victims' basic needs. These problems only caused more suffering for the victims. Similarly, Muhtada (2008) also mentions the weaknesses of the institutions in overcoming the disasters. He proposed a ‘whole-of-government’ approach to solve the problems caused by the mudflow.

Management Advisory Committee (MAC) designed ‘whole-of-government’ concept in April 2004 as a response to the need of policy integration and coordination among the multiple agencies of government. MAC defined ‘whole-of-government’ as ‘public service agencies working across portfolio boundaries to achieve shared goal and an integrated government response to particular issues’. This concept is similar to the notions of ‘joined groups’ in UK and ‘horizontalism’ in delivery service in Canada (Muhtada, 2008).

¹ This article is an edited version of the original appearance as the Chapter 3 (The Mainstream) of my MA Thesis, *Mediated Disaster: The role of mainstream and alternative media in East Java mud volcano disaster*.

² Correspondence: Anton Novenanto. Sociology Department, Brawijaya University. Jl. Veteran, Malang 65145, East Java, Indonesia. Phone: ++62 341 575755. E-mail: sosiolog.ub@gmail.com

In this article, I focus on how the mainstream media constructed the disasters, not from the media text but look into the process of constructing the media text, the news making. In this article, I tend to use the term “Lapindo case”, rather Lap indo mud or Porong mud or Sidoarjo mud, to show that the disaster occurred is not only caused by the mud eruption and/or mudflow (physical damage), but it is closely related to social structure and social processes in the different level of society (social calamity). The data in this article is gained from my ethnographic fieldwork in the disaster site in Porong, Sidoarjo. I added those data with the combination of: *first*, interviews with some media workers (journalists and editors) from different media in Surabaya, representing the media in East Java, to know about journalist routines and the editorial policies in some media in the Lapindo case news making; *second*, observation to the journalist’s routines when they were producing the news; and, *third*, literature study to the mainstream media materials (newspaper clippings, television documentation, and radio recording) to give more views on the different construction of this case.

The framed disaster

In general, disaster is horrible. However, according to the media law of “bad news is good news”, so stories about disasters always get a great amount of public attention. This is a chance for media organization: more terrible a disaster, more news are made. The 1973 American newspaper publishers association survey found that “accident and disasters” were read by 39 percent of the readers (Sood *et al.*, 1987). This is a high rate compared to that of political news (25 percent) and general/non-local/human interest news (25 percent). Disasters are always economically beneficial for the media industry because the more people are curious to know about disasters the more media is consumed. Reporting disaster is a rare opportunity to provide a valuable service to local victims, to increase broadcast ratings and newspaper circulation, and to ‘make a mark’ on disaster aftermath institution’s management. Images of suffering make for emotive coverage that is seen as engaging the audience. In short, disasters are high-value news commodity, a facticity.

Several works on mainstream media role in both natural and man-made disasters show the problem of marginalization of victim’s voices in the media. Button (2002) sees popular media failed to articulate the victim’s voice. The victims’ silence was not a coincidence, but it’s socially and politically constructed.

Button (2002) analyses Jonathan Harr’s book, *A Civil Action* published by Random House 1996 and a movie adapted from that book produced by Disney’s Touchstone Pictures, both book and movie, talking about toxic groundwater contamination, which is believed to be the cause of the deaths of several children in the Boston suburb of Woburn. The cause of the disaster remains a controversial debate since the Department of Public Health argued that the instances of leukemia did not correlate with groundwater contamination. The case was brought to the courts, but all appeals were rejected, and in 1990 the United States Supreme Courts refused to hear the case again.

The eliminations of victims’ voices also happen in media reportage of the Exxon Valdez case, oil spills in Alaska. In the first two weeks of oil spills coverage, mainstream media failed to perceive the experiences and contributions of Alaska natives into their news (Daley and O’Neill’s 1991 in Widener and Gunter, 2007). The situation had been continuing until the next six months, when mainstream media news was dominated by information from powerful elites of the state of Alaska, the federal government, and the oil industry (Smith, 1993 in Widener and Gunter, 2007). Similarly, Button (1999) compares local and international media reportage of oil spills in Great Britain. Later, even though the cause of oil spills is debatable, is it because natural (bad weather) or human error, Button found that the local media made extensive coverage of the spill for months after the international media departed and all but abandoned the story (p. 127-8). However the media tended to put more concern on the social conflicts which emerged in the aftermath of the oil spills, but failed in discussing the long-term effects. Again, Button points out that the media failed to record the voice of disaster victims’ voices resulted by the disaster.

Making news is not just to reconstruct an event, more than it is a creation of knowledge, constructing a public discourse. Looking at the news making process at the same time is analyzing the public discourse construction. In the beginning, news is a tool for people to give and get information about some events. As a tool, news is considered as window, not only to see what happen outside our house, but most importantly to *learn* about the others. News is a shared knowledge, then readers understanding about *the others* depends on whether “the window is large or small, has many panes or few, whether the glass is opaque or clear, whether the window faces a

street or a backyard (Tuchman, 1978:1).” People’s knowledge about an event is constructed through media frame in news making of the event. Different people reading different news from different media may have different understanding about an event.

News is a result of an editing process, and it is also about how to frame an event. In this sense, media has a power to construct people’s reality. However, not all media workers freely made their news. Like other human, media workers have their routines as ordinary people; besides they have to do their professional works. As Erickson *et al.* (1989 in Anderson, 2002:11) note, “news is a product of transactions between journalists and their sources.” The primary source of reality for news is not what is displayed or what happen in the real world. The reality of news is embedded in the nature and type of social and cultural relations that develop between journalists and their sources.

Then, speaking about frames, I stand in the position of looking two different kinds of frames, *media frame* and *individual frame* (Scheufele, 1999). The concept of *media frame*, developed by Gamson and Modigliani (1987:143 in Scheufele, 1999), is defined as, “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of event. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue.” In short, media frame is how media represent an event in the form of media reality. There are three aspects in this media framing: the journalistic instinct of the journalists, the economy-politic of media (ownership and market), and the editorial policy. In the field, journalist’s instinct is tested to see at least five important traits (Entman, 1993 in Scheufele, 1999): a) importance judgments, whether an event has newsworthiness or not; b) agency, which informant is the most suitable in representing an event; c) identification of the potential victims, which means who are the most vulnerable; d) categorization, or the event label; and e) generalization to a broader context, which involves a simplification of facts. In theory, a good journalistic product will be achieved when journalists are able to separate fact from opinion when they write news. But in many cases, this idealism has to break when media owners and market interest meddle in the editorial policy. Media ownership, which is increasingly becoming more centralized these days, and the market, are believed to influence image making in the media; image making here does not only mean the news stories, but all other media materials, including advertisements. These two variables, journalist’s routine and media ownership and the market, are collided in the hand of editor that can be seen in looking at the editorial policy. Editors have to combine the raw news material as a result of journalist routine in gaining data and the owner’s interest into a published news.

Meanwhile, the individual frame concept, developed by Entman (1993 in Scheufele, 1999), is defined as “mentally stored clusters of ideas that guide individuals’ processing of information.” Further, Gerhards and Rucht (1992 in Scheufele, 1999) developed this concept and categorized three different types of individual framing: a) diagnostic framing, how audience identifies and attributes disaster problems; b) prognostic framing, how audience selects information according to their need; and c) motivational framing, how audience engages with these problem and involves in several actions, such as creating alternative media. These individual frames are playing when readers read the news to add their preference in understanding an event as media is representing it. In this sense, audience is not posed as a passive group that consuming and taking for granted all information constructed by the media. In fact, audience has power to select the mediated information from media to construct their reality of an event.

The journalist routines

Laksana Agung Saputra, a Kompas reporter, got an sms (short -message-service) from his colleague informing about a gas leak in Porong early morning. So, he went to Renokenongo village without having his breakfast that morning, may 29 2006.

At the time he got to the place, he detected a strong smell like sulfur. He saw a white smoke coming out from a paddy field, and some liquid emerged from the same point. The smell came from that smoke, and polluting two citizens who had been taken to nearest *puskesmas* (society health center). That morning, external relations coordinator Lapindo Brantas, Arief Setyo Widodo, held a press conference. Lapindo Brantas’s oil exploration site was located only a few meters from the gas leak. Arief said that there was a gas leak from under Earth surface, and the company was still investigating the cause of the leak.

After the press conference, the journalists went away to do other things. Since Laksana did not have breakfast that morning, he went to a *warung* (food stall) in the village just to have a cup of coffee. Knowing that her customer was a journalist, Bu Sri, the *warung* owner, accompanied him to a house rented by Lapindo's workers. There, he met Syahdun, the drilling foreman. Syahdun told him that the gas explosion was triggered by the broken of borehole formation. This argument opens Kompas' first article about Lapindo case, titled *sumur gas bocor, penduduk diungsikan* (30/05/06),

Sumur pengeboran milik PT Lapindo Brantas di desa Renokenongo, kecamatan Porong, kabupaten Sidoarjo, Jawa Timur, senin (29/5) kemarin bocor. Gas dari sumur tersebut keluar ke permukaan tanah melalui rawa yang ada di sampingnya. (The borehole of Lapindo Brantas Inc. in Renokenongo village, Porong district, Sidoarjo Regency, East Java, monday (29/5) leaked. The gas from the borehole came out to the Earth surface through the land cracks surrounding it.)

In the closing of that Syahdun's statement appeared,

Diperkirakan dinding sumur bagian dalam runtuh. (It's predicted that the underground borehole walls had destroyed.)

Syahdun was not working for Lapindo Brantas Inc. directly. He worked for PT Tiga Musim Mas Jaya, a subcontract drilling company for Lapindo. Few days after the news published, Syahdun was fired (Interview with Laksana).

Before I enter further discussion about the mud disaster news making, I need to draw a brief condition of media discourse at the time. Two days before the mud first erupted, May 27, 2006, at 5:54 am local time a magnitude (6.3 richter scale) earthquake struck Yogyakarta, and several cities in Central Java. It was located about 250 kilometers to the West of Banjar Panji 1 well. The earthquake caused thousands of people died. The central government declared Yogyakarta Earthquake as a national disaster. National (and some local) media allocated more space for its aftermath and reconstruction process, since the reconstruction of damage d area brought many problems and there were plenty of national and international organizations involved in the reconstruction. The Yogyakarta earthquake stories overcame other stories, and became the central issue on media from end of may 2006 until two months later.

Between 5 and 8 a.m. the following day, in the well began to flood. Early in the May 29 morning, mud began burbling out of the ground about 150 meters away (Davies *et al.*, 2008).

In this sense, the gas explosion in Porong, Sidoarjo became an alternative story for East Java media, whose audiences were not directly impacted by the Yogyakarta earthquake. Some local media gave special space for the mud disaster story, such as Surya, a Surabaya -based daily paper under *Kelompok Kompas Gramedia* (KKG), that allotted space about a gas leak on its headlines since the first day (interview with Dhimam Abror Djuraid former chief editor of Surya)³ and *Suara Surabaya Media*, a local media group, that assigned one reporter to stand-by in Porong (Errol Jonathans, Suara Surabaya Media Operational Director, personal communication).

Above was an interview with Dhimam Abror Djuraid former chief editor of Surya when the disaster occurred. Dhimam admits, since beginning the eruption has stolen his attention until now he leads Surabaya Post, another local newspaper owned by Bakrie and Brothers. However, as the time went by and the disaster's impacts grew larger, the story of East Java mud volcano became a mainstream story on national mainstream media for months. But, Laksana's story appearance on the national page posed this gas leak in Porong was a national concern, not only local (East Java). The *alternative* statement of Syahdun, however, prompted public debate about this mud eruption trigger, since other media tended to use Lapindo's argument about Yogyakarta earthquake as trigger, following the mainstream opinion from Lapindo representations.

Everyday, journalists are limited by time (deadline) and space (words economy) when he/she writes news. Each media organization has routine deadlines and also limited space for publication. In this sense, the media makers have to be very selective to what they are going to write. This may cause a problem of simplification of facts, because not all facts about an event can be put in the news. In fact, journalists tend to use a centralized information source, *information czar* (person with official status and relevant expertise to convey the most credible), as authoritative informant to interpret and clarify complexity of a disaster (Sood, 1987:35). Button (2002) also sees this tendency, that media prefer "to rely on official accounts and experts reinforce the cultural division between professional and lay knowledge (p. 157)." In other words, a media story of a particular

event may be entertaining, but at the same time forgetting ordinary people stories or in the case of disaster events, the victims' stories.

In the Lapindo case, journalists' reportage was related to their everyday routine in gathering facts. Porong, that is quite far from Surabaya, the center of almost all national media bureaus in East Java, made not all journalists go easily to the disaster site. This data I gain from observing journalist everyday routines. Not all national media has a correspondent for Sidoarjo. East Java is usually divided into six regions: a) Surabaya, that also means Sidoarjo, Mojokerto, Jombang, and Gresik; b) Malang, Blitar, Kediri; c) Madiun, Ponorogo, Pacitan, Ngawi; d) Bojonegoro, Cepu, Tuban, Lamongan; e) Jember, Pasuruan, Probolinggo, Banyuwangi; and f) Madura. In each region every media only needs one correspondent, except Surabaya where usually more people are needed. Not every media had own journalists. Some media organizations used a stringer (*koresponden*) without any written work contract. In general, these stringers had no basic salary. They were paid for how many news they write. Even though those journalists worked under national media conglomeration, their salaries were far from that of living standard. No social insurance, health insurance, pension were covered. Although there was discussion in deciding reportage, but as they were paid based on their published stories, sometimes these journalists could not debate editor's reportage assignment. Assignment means money, rather had to initiate and creatively arrange own reportage, which might be not approved by the editors, journalists tended to do what their editors told them to do.

Different from printed journalists, TV journalists sometimes could not see their piece since documenting video material was not as easy as documenting printed material. Plus they never know when their work will appear. It could be in regular news, but sometimes in unscheduled news feed. In most cases, TV correspondents sent raw material and rarely attached it with the proposed news script, because editors might write new news script without any confirmation to the journalist in charge.

This unbeneficial condition for journalists made them lazy to gain data from informants in field. This material condition had pushed journalist into a copy-paste habit. It meant journalists got their news from fellow journalists, not from their direct interview with informants. Sometimes, the journalists are using old materials for their news. This habit happened with TV journalists. For instance, when there was a broken dyke, TV journalists did not go to the location but simply used their *old stuffs* for illustration of broken dyke news. However, national audiences did not know whether the picture of a recent broken dyke actually the picture of previous news. All dykes looked the same, so they did not have to take another picture.

The will for raising stories about refugees or victims had to face these very technical conditions of journalist of gaining data. A journalist usually had *fixer*, informant that she/he trusted. Each journalist had more than a fixer for representing each group, such as the victims, Lapindo, BPLS and the government. The choosing of a fixer was dilemmatic, especially fixer from victims. The mud victims were divided into several groups, which each group has their own basic interests (Novenanto, 2009). Journalists only made contact with some group's leaders, sometimes not all groups. From these leaders a journalist got information about the victims' life and profile. Thus, in the news, the leaders represented the victims. One day, a national magazine reporter visited the refugee camp, and knowing that I was gaining data from the a female refugee, this reporter asked me a lot of questions in order to write report about the life of the female refugees. The information from the victims was filtered since the first journalists gain data. This choosing czar informant habit has eliminated the opportunity in getting ordinary victims' stories.

Another fact that also happens was the journalist rotation. This fact can be either beneficial or detrimental for social construction of the disaster that happened for more than three years. Journalist rotation is a common in the circle of media life. Rotation is aimed for refreshing journalists so that they are not bored working in the same location or desk for a long period of time. But journalist rotation had made a disconnected construction of the disaster event. There was no single construction built in of the Lapindo case. The image construction of the Lapindo case was mixed-up when a new journalist repeated the same information that had been published by previous journalists. Even though some media has given special space for the disaster story, but in fact these media did not prepare their journalists with knowledge about mud volcano or disaster reconstruction. Some journalists were categorized as lucky to have brainstorming about mud volcano and geological explanation from the experts even though there was no official knowledge transfer from previous journalist to the new one. Knowledge transfer here did not only mean

knowledge about the Lapindo case, but more about technical things such as local contacts to the victims. New journalist had to search new network among local community, the government and the company, Lapindo.

What I want to say is that journalist rotation sometimes disconnects the networks that have been made by the previous journalists. But, everything has its purpose; new reporters have to be trained in how to gain information in any condition even if they have never been in the area at all. New challenge might train journalist's critical thinking about a case, when they have to gain information from nothing. In some cases, their stories were just repetition of the previous journalist's report. It is logic since the new reporters were constructing their knowledge about Lapindo case based on the same facts as the previous journalists. With this kind of situation, it was not easy to dig deeper data about the mud disaster, because when a reporter was getting into the main discussion about the case, he/she had to move to different area, and be replaced with new reporters. Another problem arose was most media did not write their editorial policy, including about Lapindo case. The media principles were informally transferred from senior journalists to the junior, or editors to the journalists; whether what should be done and what shall not. This internalization is done by practicing when editors edit and decide on which story is worth and which is not.

Another temptation for journalists was the envelope (*amplop*). The envelope itself was not a matter, but the content of envelope was the most important. Money and any other form of material, for economically unstable journalists, were always attractive. After all, not every journalist realized his/her position as a journalist. In this side, there were two categories of journalists: the ones who were motivated to become a journalist, and those who had no other job choices. Journalist's welfare is a problem for journalist professionalism. Since the media could not provide their journalists with enough earning, journalists felt free to get money from other sources, even from their informants. Journalist integrity was not suddenly created when a journalist wrote his/her story, but through a never-ending dialectical process. It can be shaped from the journalistic and intellectual skills of the journalists, together with the awareness of media's social role as the tool of liberation.

Besides the fact that not every journalist completed formal education in journalism such as journalism department or mass communication sciences department, or even non-formal experience, such as student publication (magazine or newsletter), journalism training, or actively write column in mass media, not all media are consistent to disseminate journalistic professionalism. Almost all journalists start their career with trial-and-error (write news as they can, while the editor give direction and do the editing), with an expectation that with this process a junior reporter would write news with media standard, and learn journalism. But, not all junior reporters could understand this process and start to learn deeper about journalism. There were reporters who did this job because they need money. Their duty was just reporting an event, without any attempt to improve their journalistic skills. When these reporters were unhappy with their improper salary, they would search other ways to get more income by putting aside the ethics, i.e. receiving (or hunting) *envelope* or asking facilities from informants for his/her personal purpose. Lapindo noticed this circumstance, and thought that to interfere with the public discourse in the media sometimes did not have to play with the media as a huge organization, but simply at the journalist level, the very start of every discourse in the media. Fulfilling journalists with any kind of material goods (e.g. money, jacket, t-shirt, or any kind of merchandise) was sometimes more effective to tame journalist criticism to Lapindo in their news. But this strategy was not the only one that Lapindo used for its image creating.

The power of capital

August 27, 2008 evening I was having dinner with my friend in Soekarno-Hatta international airport, Jakarta. He works as a television journalist in TVOne. TVOne is a private national television company in Indonesia under the management of *Bakrie & Brothers Inc.* The oldest of Bakrie family, Aburizal Bakrie is the Minister of Welfare Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2004-2009.

He told me his disappointment to his editor who rejected his proposal for doing reportage about *Lapindo mud* disaster in Sidoarjo, East Java. He mumbled, "TVOne will not raise any news of Lapindo, since Bakrie is the owner of Lapindo Brantas Inc." We laughed and finished our meals.

This short conversation that occurred only a few minutes still remains in my memory when I write this article. However, my friend's words, that we laughed at, are just another prove of argument proposed by Gamson *et al.* (1992) that media ownership influences the (not) media text.

Undoubtedly, media is a business organization, which cannot segregate itself from the market. Media industries live from the market through advertisement. There is a situation in which a media should be careful and remains *silent* on stories about their potential market so that there will be no cancelation or less commercial contract. For example, an ethical problem arose when media covered conflict between labors and their company. Some media stepped back a while from its *watchdog* role by writing stories that were tendentiously pro-a company which had paid advertisement in the media.

Some reporters in Surabaya act both as a journalist and marketing officer at once. This strategy is believed to be more effective to get advertisement for the long lasting of a media, since there is a tendency that company will reject a marketing sales person, but open for journalist interview. Journalist then offers promotional sounds about a product, so the company will put advertisement. But, sometimes, journalist threatens to write a bad story about the company, so the company will take the *jalan damai* (peace path) and put advertisement in the media. Anyway, not all journalists are like that. There are idealistic journalists who sometimes have opposing stand against the editorial policy of their media. More problems occur when the media owner is also involved in the editorial policy.

According to Lapindo's point of view, media reportage s in this case were not in proportional order and tended to corner Lapindo. This tendency was getting stronger when Timnas PLPS declared that Lapindo drilling activities had triggered mud eruption (Akbar, 2007, Schiller *et al.*, 2008). Timnas PLPS found that Lapindo did not use safety casing, which triggered a *kick*. Lapindo's attempts to close the borehole after the kick caused a blowout. Easily, the media blamed Lapindo as the main cause of this disaster. The media began to investigate who was behind Lapindo. The finding showed that Lapindo is supported by one of the most powerful persons in this country, Aburizal Bakrie, the coordinating minister of people's welfare and also one of the leading figures of *Golkar* Party, the winning party in the 2004 Election. At the time the hot mud erupted, Bakrie, with his *energi mega persada* (EMP) owned half shares of Lapindo. Medco owned 32 percent of the Lapindo Brantas shares, while the rest 18 percent was Santos' (an Australian company). Public opinion raised: Bakrie had to hold responsible for the disaster aftermath. Based on my observation and interviews, in the first six months after the first eruption, the journalists were reporting the mudflow effects from different point of views, such as: the growing of impacted areas, the construction and breakage of dyke, the fast growing of dislocated people, the evacuation, the life in refugee camps, the plan to stop and manage the eruption, the controversy of mud control, until the law suit. Until the end of 2006, the media still had no focus in reporting the mud disaster, and tended to blame Lapindo for causing the disaster.

At that time, there was no attempt from Lapindo to interfere with public opinion in the media. When the refugee waves got larger in the beginning of 2007, there was an intervention from Bakrie Group to the media; their intention was to not bring this matter to political area (interview with Dhimam Abror Djuraid, *Surabaya Post* Chief Editor). In March 2007, the national government, with *Perpres* 14/2007 about the BPLS, ordered Lapindo to purchase villagers' lands and buildings. For the victims, the fact that government designated Lapindo to pay compensation proved that Lapindo was culpable for causing the disaster. In fact, through *Perpres* 14/2007 the government split the responsibility between Lapindo and the government. According to the *Perpres*, the government would pay the BPLS operational budget and any costs related to social impact handling, while Lapindo should pay the price of physical damage and prevent it from getting bigger (such as purchasing lands and building dykes). The sharing budget in this *Perpres* contrasts with the previous Law, *Keppres* 13/2006 about Timnas PLPS, which all costs are on Lapindo's. In the next Law, *Perpres* 48/2008 all costs are on government's budget, without any Lapindo's involvement. At that time, any problems related to compensation payment were attributed to Lapindo. In this situation, Lapindo (and Bakrie) started to think that they were victim of media reportage.

After the signing of *Perpres* 14/2007, Lapindo's executives started to do media visit more frequently. They gave updates and documents about any facts and progress about the mud handling. Lapindo's approach changed every time a media responded to their visit. Yet, Lapindo started to pay for advertisement, i.e. the announcement of compensated victims list, and event advertorials. Lapindo's intervention to steer public opinion through media was very serious. Lapindo was offering each media in Surabaya, one billion rupiahs in budget for commercial approach, as Errol Jonathans tells me,

Lapindo visited us. Maybe you've heard the issue, 1 billion for media. It was not for all media, but only for one media. The story was, we were visited. The point was they want to give 'thank s' to *Suara Surabaya* as consequence of giving proportional information about the mud event. With that kind of sacrifice, they wanted to give something with commercial approach. They wanted to be interviewed. They brought 1 billion, but we rejected it. That time we said, *Suara Surabaya* needed Lapindo's openness. Is it possible Lapindo's easy to clarify anything about the event? (Interview with Errol).

It seemed that this commercial approach was successful on some media. On november 8 2007, Lapindo advertisement appeared in *Kompas* (8/11/07). From the text, Lapindo tried to steer public opinion that the cause of mud eruption was not caused by their drilling activities. The text in advertisement to quote,

Tanpa diduga, tiba-tiba lumpur itu menyembur di luar are a pengeboran, yakni semburan terjadi di desa Siring, yang berjarak kira-kira 200 meter dari sumur pengeboran jadi bukan dari lubang pengeboran, semburan terjadi tanggal 29 Mei 2006 setelah gempa Yogyakarta. ... Para ahli meyakinkan, bahwa kejadian semburan lumpur yang terjadi di Sidoarjo adalah kejadian alam, bukan akibat pengeboran yang dilakukan oleh Lapindo Brantas Inc. (Never predicted before, suddenly mud blows out from outside the drilling area, in Siring village, about 200 meters from Lapindo's drilling well, so it is not from the borehole. Eruption occurred since 29 may after the Yogyakarta earthquake. ... Experts are convinced that mud eruption is a natural phenomenon, not because of Lapindo Brantas Inc. drilling activities.)

From the text and images in the advertisement, Lapindo tended to create an understanding that: Lapindo had nothing to do with the eruption. This attempt can be understood because Lapindo wanted to limit their responsibility in this disaster (Schiller *et al.*, 2008). By saying that the eruption was triggered by earthquake, the mud volcano would be classified as natural disaster, then the government should take all the responsibility of handling the victims, and include Lapindo as a victim. But if this mud disaster was categorized as technological disaster, as the consequence of its drilling activities, Lapindo must to take all the responsibility. For Lapindo, the cost of *media shopping* for image constructing was too small compared to what Lapindo would spend if this disaster categorized as man-made disaster. By doing media shopping, Lapindo could easily drive public discussion about what caused the mud volcano and who should be responsible for this disaster.

Surya Daily was one of the local media that took Lapindo's advertorial offers . Lapindo paid a full page of *Surya's* and filled it with any news about mud according to Lapindo's point of view. The advertorial was designed as an ordinary *Surya's* page. The font type and color, headings, column design, and photos indicated so. For a lay man in media, it was just the same as a normal *Surya* full page, but it was totally a full page advertorial of Lapindo. Even though they took the advertorial, *Surya* claimed that they were still independent in news making about the mud disaster, and critical to Lapindo (Interview with Dhimam). Advertorial and/or advertisement were the marketing division's business, not the newsroom. So whatever decided by the marketing would not affect the editorial policy. However, the space for the 'normal' news, about one or two a day, was incomparable with a full page advertorial, which appeared every day for 6 months.

In July 2008, Bakrie bought *Surabaya Post* daily, and Dhimam Abror, *Surya* chief editor when the first eruption, started to work as *Surabaya Post* chief editor since October 1st 2008. Dhimam argues that by working in the *Surabaya Post* he could have more opportunity to gain his vision about journalism. He also was convinced that the *Surabaya Post* would not take part as Bakrie's tools in the mud disaster. For him, it was too expensive for Bakrie group to buy the *Surabaya Post* only for the purpose of making it as their counter image on the mud disaster issue. Anyhow, Dhimam with his own initiative was very careful to act in deciding editorial policy about the Lapindo case. The option was: would the *Surabaya Post* write stories about Lapindo case but with *softer* language or not to write at all? In that period, which Dhimam called as the period of rehabilitation of the *Surabaya Post*, he chose not to write a story at all about Lapindo case. But he said that he took this decision without any pressure from the management, whether the *Surabaya Post* should write or not about the case. "It was purely the editor's decision without any pressure from the owner," says Dhimam. But this choice was dilemmatic. Not writing also could be interpreted as the taming of media in Lapindo case.

The concentration of media ownership in the global world becomes a new global media empire of the production of information, which means also the mono poly of social construction of public

discourse of an event because, “when corporations own both the production houses and distributors of media images, they can guarantee themselves a captive audience for their product (Gamson *et al.* 1992:378).” In Indonesia, mass media (electronic and print) in the national level are merged into several groups. Even multinational media industries have occupied some of national and local media companies. Then, producing images cannot be released from the hegemonic pressure of media owners and the framing and frame transformation of media producers. Framing could not be pulled out from the basic problem, or in Goffman’s words, “the very vulnerability of the framing process makes it a locus of potential struggle, not a leaden reality to which we all inevitably must yield (in Ibid: 384).” Media then is a set of arenas where power is being contested symbolically. In the case of *Surabaya Post Daily*, the capital has succeeded to win the symbolic contests about Lapindo case.

Anyway though ignored, the voices of the marginalized and powerless victims of these technological disasters appear in different kinds of alternative media, and also are used by the mainstream media alternatively. But the most interesting was how the excluded victims responded to the media discourse alternatively in their social actions.

The victims’ alternative responses

Even though mainstream media offered many discourses on the East Java mud volcano disaster, only few discourses triggered the victims’ response as audience. In this part I look at two memorable events for *pagar rekorlap/rekontrak*, a group of victims responding to the mediated disaster discourse: the Bamboo spears action and *Surabaya Post* 23rd february 2009 advertorial. But before entering these actions, let me briefly give some background about *pagar rekorlap*.

Pagar rekorlap is an acronym for *Paguyuban warga Renokenongo korban Lapindo* (Renokenongo villagers community of Lapindo’s victim). Renokenongo is the name of village where the mud first erupted. This name, *Pagar Rekorlap* is their latest name. The previous name was *pagar rekontrak* or *paguyuban warga Renokenongo menolak kontrak* (Renokenongo villagers community rejects contract). The villagers also made joke, *Renokenongo sekarang menjadi Reno Kenangan* (Renokenongo has become Reno Kenangan. ‘*Kenangan*’ means memory).

When the fieldwork was done, Pitanto, the vice leader, mentioned that there were 563 households of *pagar rekorlap*, who all live in the temporary refugee camp in *pasar baru Porong* (Porong new market). Renokenongo was the latest of the first four villages that included in the *Perpres* 14/2007. They were dislocated as a consequence of *Pertamina gas* pipe explosion, 26 november 2006. The pipe, which was under the dyke, could not stand to hold load of the dyke. It exploded and destroyed the dyke that held the mud to protect Renokenongo village. In the 4th December 2006, there was a meeting between the representations of the four villages (Jatirejo, Kedungbendo, Renokenongo and Siring) with Lapindo, facilitated by Sidoarjo Regent Win Hendrarso in Sidoarjo *pendapa*, Renokenongo villagers had not been included as the victim according to *peta area terdampak* (impacted area map) date 3 December 2006 even though the mud had flooded the village. Renokenongo villagers bargained Lapindo and government to get their village included in the impacted area map. This negotiation succeeded, in March 2007 government added Renokenongo villages as the impacted area. Even so, the villagers refused to sign the land - purchasing contract with Lapindo. They established *pagar rekontrak* (*paguyuban warga Renokenongo menolak kontrak*/Renokenongo villagers community reject contract). They disagreed to the compensation scheme of *Perpres* 14/2007. After having long negotiation (until September 2008) with Lapindo and the government, *pagar rekontrak* finally agree to *Perpres* 14/2007, to get compensation as the scheme offered, and changed their name to *pagar rekorlap* because they accept the compensation contract. Then, they identify themselves as the Lapindo’s victims (*korban Lapindo*). (For further discussion about *pagar rekorlap* see Novenanto 2009).

Pagar rekorlap showed a unique situation of a group of victims. All members of *pagar rekorlap* are from the same village, Renokenongo. After they were dislocated, they lived together in one location in *pasar baru Porong*. Recently, the *pagar rekorlap* moved from *pasar baru Porong* to Kedung Kampil village, Porong in June 2009. They not only set up a *posko*, but also shared the same prayer rooms (*mushola*) and bathrooms. It was easy to communicate and coordinate between villagers. If there was something important to discuss, they just called their neighbors and gathered in *posko*. That is why; *pagar rekorlap* seemed to be more solid than the other groups. They have plans for their future. They are planning not to live in remote places, as most of dislocated persons

do, but they set up collectively to purchase land and live together in the same area. To buy the land, they needed a lot of money, which they hoped they would get it from the compensation money. Most of these villagers only have *pethok D* land deed, with only several of them with legal formal land certificates. Lapindo did not admit their land deeds. Therefore, they, jointly, met with the new East Java Governor, Soekarwo, to obtain support them in getting their formal land deeds from the East Java BPN.

The first action responding media image was *peristiwa bambu runcing* (the Bamboo spears action). In August 2007 (2008), mainstream media reported Sidoarjo regent's plan to use the Porong new market (*pasar baru Porong*), as it had been planned, as an ordinary market; this plan became a discourse in several media. The regent of Sidoarjo allotted Porong new market as a temporary refugee camp for the dislocated villagers. The old Porong market was full of sellers, so in the evening these sellers flowed into the Porong Street and made more traffic. These sellers were scheduled to move in from the old market in the end of 2006, but the Sidoarjo regent postponed this plan since the victims of the East Java mud volcano disaster were still using the new market as a refugee camp until August 2009. At that moment, there were hundreds of families of *pagar rekontrak* (now *pagar rekorlap*), called *orang-orang pasar* (the market people), still living in the Porong new market. For these people, the Sidoarjo regency plan was an act of forcing the refugee to move from the refugee camp. The situation was dilemmatic. The people of *pagar rekontrak* had not got certainty from Lapindo whether they would get the compensation money from Lapindo since they did not have land certificates as their evidence of having the abandoned lands and/or buildings (Novenanto 2009).

These people felt they had lost their pride by losing their lands and/or buildings, and they would do anything to protect the only pride they had: their life. Even though this was only *a plan*, but as the media put it as main discourse for days, this rumor was rampant among the people of *pagar rekontrak* and generated their emotions and reactions. Whether coincidentally or not, this rumor spread in August, the sacred month for Indonesians. The victims of *pagar rekontrak* reproduced the symbol of this 50-years-old Independence moment when the rumor of their eviction from Porong new market was spreading. After they heard the rumor, spontaneously they made bamboo spears and put them encircling the market, thus looked like a fortress. Some victims said that the atmosphere in the market at that time was like a battlefield. Everyone was ready to die to protect the market, because they were not having sureness about their compensation status; in addition the government seemed to be against these people by planning to evict them from the market instead of helping them to get their rights as a 'normal citizen'. For these people, the state was not doing what it was supposed to do, which was fulfilling its citizens' rights. The independence day, then, became a momentum for these victims to declare that they were not liberated yet.

Bamboo spears action, which was triggered by media reportage, later turned into media focus for days. This action became public attention since these victims claimed that they were ready to fight till the end. For days, the police and military intelligences were coming to the market asking the people for what these people wanted to do. The purpose was that they would not want any mess occurred in Sidoarjo. Anyhow, *pagar rekontrak* managed to steal mainstream media's attention by building bamboo spear fortress surrounding the market. In short, their reaction reopened the discussion of mud disaster compensation publicly. By that time, *pagar rekontrak* was still in negotiation with Lapindo about the compensation. Lapindo rejected to purchase *pagar rekontrak* lands since most of those lands had no legal land certificates. Lapindo only wanted to buy lands with certificate, as the Law about land said so. For those who only had land deeds (*pethok D*), Lapindo offered different option, *cash-and-resettlement*, which meant 20 percent of the total price would be paid in cash, the 80 percent, would not be paid in cash but Lapindo offered new housing in Kahuripan Nirvana Village (KNV), another unit branch of *Bakrielands*, Bakrie's property business section. *pagar rekontrak* did not want to take Lapindo's offer because this kind of compensation had no legal basis, "*tak ada dasar hukumnya*"; they still wanted the 20:80 cash-and-carry scheme as written in *Perpres* 14/2007. At the same time, these people needed money to buy land for their resettlement. They had planned to live together in the same location as a solid community when they were living in Renokenongo village before the mud sank the village. Bamboo spears action became media image to symbolize the bargaining process of compensation between Lapindo and *pagar rekontrak*.

Media reality is sometimes not always representing the real, but media reality is a completely different reality. The media images, anyway, can trigger reaction from audiences. The other interesting story happened on February 23 2009 evening. That night a conflict between the people of *pagar rekontrak* almost happened. It was triggered by hyper-reality.

Monday, February 23 afternoon, two men entered the Porong new market. They wanted to distribute *Surabaya Post* of that day edition in the market for free. There were about 500 copies of the *Surabaya Post* ready to be distributed. But this plan was not successful because *pagar rekontrak*'s caretakers caught these guys and leased the newspapers. The caretakers were suspicious of the free circulated newspaper action for victims. *Pagar rekontrak*'s caretakers knew that the *Surabaya Post* is a newspaper affiliated to Bakrie family. They also knew that the *Surabaya Post* head of commissary, Andi Darusalam, is also the Vice President of Mina rak Lapindo Jaya, the company established to purchase people's lands and buildings. That day, *Surabaya Post* raised news, in the front page, titled *250 rekening diserahkan* (250 Bank Accounts Handed). The story was about Lapindo handing 250 BRI bank accounts to the victims of the mud disaster on Monday morning. But not that story that triggered reaction, it was the advertorial. In its back cover, *Surabaya Post* put full page advertorial from Lapindo (see Figure 1). This even happened after the interview with Dhiman, but the author did not have a chance to crosscheck the advertorial images to *Surabaya Post*.

The advertorial contained the name list of 250 victims that already received book account in order to get compensation. There were three photos illustrating the process of give-and-take of the book account. In one of the photos there was a picture of one member of *pagar rekontrak* who had received the book account.

Anyway, some of victims had already received and read the newspaper. They were green with envy; they accused the person in the photo was cheating the others who did not have certainty about the compensation. The rumor about this person receiving a book account spread among other *pagar rekontrak* members. That night almost happened physical conflict because people attacked this person's house, but *pagar rekontrak* caretakers headed of this action and straightaway held a meeting that night to make everything clear.

The accused told everybody that he had not received any bank account, the sign of getting the 80 percent remaining compensation. He also had an alibi that he had never been in that building that morning. *Pagar rekontrak* caretakers then looked again at the advertorial photo. And they found that the picture published that day was not taken in the morning, but it was a picture of *pagar rekontrak* members signing contract in September 2008. Then everything was clear. This particular event of media triggering conflict has been discussed before in the study of media role in Ambon in creating and maintaining conflict. The conflict in society is not triggered by the different access to mode of production, as put forward by classic Marxism, but it is triggered by misinformation and suspicion circulating in the society (Spyer 2002).

Figure 1.



Conclusion

The principle of journalism practice is how to write news as objectively as possible. This requires accuracy and power to keep in balance. The media has the role to serve people's rights to know and rights to express. Basically, media freedom belongs to the society, not the media owners.

Media freedom will be gone when there is intervention to drive media stories according to what they want. Intentionally, or not, the media and media workers have used their power to construct their audience's knowledge. And this power can be seen in the media images about this disaster. The East Java mud volcano is an extraordinary phenomenon not only for the East Javanese, but also for Indonesians in general. This event attracts both national and international media. The disaster occurred is not only because of the mud eruption and/or mudflow (physical damage), but it is closely related to social structure and social processes in the different level of society (social calamity).

This article focuses on how the mainstream media constructed the disasters, not from the media text but look into the process of constructing the media images. The media law of "bad news is good news", so stories about disasters always get a great amount of public attention. Disasters are high-value news commodity, a facticity. But, in general, media has failed to record the voice of disaster victims' voices resulted by the disaster. This tendency also happened in the Lapindo case reportage. The voices of the victims are excluded as the consequences of the journalist routines (gaining data, rotation, and material conditions) and the capital intervention (media shopping and buying media). Lapindo (and Bakrie), as one of the audience, thought that they were victim of media reportage. So they started to do media shopping for image constructing because it was too small compared to what Lapindo would spend if this disaster categorized as man-made disaster. By doing media shopping, Lapindo could easily drive public discussion about what caused the mud volcano and who should be responsible for this disaster.

In this sense, the will for raising stories about refugees or victims had to face these very technical conditions of journalist of gaining data. But, speaking about frames, not only media who has frame, the media frame, but the audience also has different frame when reading the media, which called the individual frame. The audience is not posed as a passive group that consuming and taking for granted all information constructed by the media. Audience has power to select the mediated information from media to construct their reality of an event. The media images, anyway, can trigger reaction from audiences. One of the reactions was the raise of conflict within the society. The conflict was not triggered by the different access to mode of production, as put forward by classic Marxism, but it is triggered by misunderstanding since media reality is sometimes not always representing the real, but media reality is a completely different reality. The two examples of victim's reactions to media images show us that the media do have power to construct audience reality about an event, even though this reality is not 'real', or as Baudrillard says as, 'hyper-reality', which became another disaster for the victims.

References

- Akbar, A. A. (2007) *Konspirasi di Balik Lumpur Lapindo*, Yogyakarta: Galang Press.
- Anderson, A. G. (2002) The Media Politics of Oil Spills. *Spill Science & Technology Bulletin* 7(1 - 2): 7-15.
- Button, G. V. (1999) The negation of disaster: the media response to oil spills in Great Britain. In Anthony Oliver-Smith dan Susanna M. Hoffman (Eds.) *The Angry Earth. Disaster in Anthropological Perspective*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Button, G. V. (2002) Popular Media Reframing of Man-Made Disasters: A Cautionary Tale. In Anthony Oliver-Smith dan Susanna M. Hoffman (Eds.) *Catastrophe and Culture. The Anthropology of Disaster*. Santa Fe: School of America Research Press.
- Gamson, W. A. (1989) News as Framing: Comments on Graber. *American Behavioral Scientist* 33:157-166.
- Gamson, W. A. & Andre Modigliani. (1989) Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach. *The American Journal of Sociology* 95 (1): 1 -37.
- Gamson, W. A., David Croteau, William Hoynes dan Theodore S. Sasson. (1992) Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 18 : 373-93.
- Kompas Daily (2006) Sumur Gas Bocor, Penduduk Diungsikan. Kompas Daily, [accessed May 24, 2009]. <http://www2.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0605/30/daerah/2687880.htm> retrieved on
- Kompas Daily (2006) PT Lapindo dan Warga Belum Capai Titik Temu. Kompas Daily [accessed May 24, 2009] <http://www2.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0605/31/jatim/53366.htm>
- Kompas Daily (2006) Lumpur Merusak Areal Sawah. Kompas Daily [accessed May 24, 2009] <http://www2.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0606/01/jatim/53407.htm>
-

-
- Kompas Daily (2006) Bergelut Tanah dan Lumpur Rawa. Kompas Daily, [accessed May 24, 2009] <http://www2.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0606/02/jatim/53416.htm>
- Kompas Daily (2006) Sudah Sepekan Gas Ganggu Warga. Kompas Daily, [accessed May 24, 2009] <http://www2.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0606/03/daerah/2696539.htm>
- Muhtada, D. (2008) Ethics, Economics and Environmental Complexity: the mud flow disaster in East Java. *Systems Research and Behavioural Science* 25 :181-91.
- Novenanto, A. (2009) Mediated Disaster. The role of mainstream and alternative media in East Java Mudvolcano Disaster, MA Thesis. Leiden: Leiden University.
- Oliver, S. A.. (1996) Anthropological Research on Hazards and Disasters. *Annual Review Anthropology* 25:303-28.
- Scheufele, D. A. (1999) Framing as a Theory of Media Effects. *Journal of Communication* 49 (1): 103-22.
- Schiller, J., Anton L. & Priyambudi S. (2008) Learning from the East Java Mudflow: Disaster Politics in Indonesia. *Indonesia* 85:51-77.
- Sood, R., Geoffrey S. & Everett M. R. (1987) "How the News Media Operate in Natural Disaster,". *Journal of Communication* 37 (3): 27-41.
- Spyer, P. (2002) Fire without Smoke and Other Phantoms of Ambon's Violence: Media Effect, Agency and the Work of Imagination. *Indonesia*. 74: 21-36.
- Tuchman, G. (1978) Making News. A Study of the Construction of Reality. New York & London: Free Press.
- Widener, P. & Valerie J. G. (2007) Oil Spill Recovery in the Media: Missing an Alaska Native Perspective. *Society and Natural Resources* 20: 767-83.

Acknowledgement

I would like to say to thank to STUNED Scholarship, Leiden University and CRCS – UGM in funding the research. Ratna Saptari and Patricia Spyer gave inspiring comments on the thesis version. Palupi Yudiasta Pitaka Ningrum and Deviana Kuspriandani helped me to gain deeper data from female refugees. Myrtati Dyah Artaria and Basis Susilo encouraged me to edit the original text for this journal. I am also indebted to the refugees in Porong Sidoarjo, NGO activists, media workers, and academics whose information I used in this article.
