

The Audiences of Pain: The Indonesian audiences' response to human rights documentaries

Introduction

Since the beginning of the twentieth century visual images, including moving pictures, have played an essential role in campaigns for human rights. They are used, among other methods, to show the world the suffering of the victims, to instill compassion in the public's mind, to claim truth in a tribunal trial, and to educate international audiences. The world's eyes have seen the burning monk from Saigon, the naked little girls burnt by a napalm bomb in Vietnam, and also the tortured prisoners of Abu Ghraib. The pictures of the damaged bodies do not just function to inform, but to urge world audiences that humanity itself is at risk. In this era of transnational communication technology and global civil society, audiences are summoned to see the suffering others of a very distant, and sometimes unimagined, place. The ubiquitousness of traditional and new media means that the audiences cannot help but to notice, give attention to, and feel something for the victims.

Pain in Human Rights Documentary

One of the main forms of visual strategies used by human rights activists is documentary. A human rights documentary has several distinctive characteristics that distinguish it from other subgenres of political documentary. Of those characteristics, two are relevant to our discussion. First, the human rights subgenre of political documentary focuses, among others, on the depiction of bodily suffering of others.¹ In addition to its function as evidence, the depiction of human bodily pain symbolically unifies otherwise different individuals, based on the premise that pain is universal.² Second, human rights documentary often uses victims' testimony as its core narrative. McLagan states that the transformative experience and the physical presence of the victims have the potential to stimulate political action.³

This study uses two human rights documentaries. One is *Operation Fine Girl*, or *OFG*, which is about rape used as war weapon in Sierra Leone. And two is *Listen to Our Voice*, or *LtOV*, which presents testimonies of torture victims in Papua, Indonesia. The documentaries were shown to 14 Indonesians, who were divided into group A and group B, and then discussed the documentaries with the researcher acting as moderator.

Pain and Solidarity

McLagan and Boltanski claim that bodily suffering is essential to human rights rhetoric.⁴ McLagan argues that "individual bodily suffering is the indivisible unit of symbolic currency in human rights media."⁵ The bodily suffering itself does not have to be represented visually, but can also be portrayed in a specific form of narrative, namely testimony. In fact, in both of the documentaries in this study the suffering was related verbally through testimonies, not visually. The presence of the survivors serves as an embodiment of the indexical link that connects the documentary and the external world.

I will start by analyzing the visual and the verbal aspects of the documentaries, then analyze the audiences' response of the portrayal of pain. *LtOV* presents the suffering almost solely through the testimony of the survivors. Illustrative footage is used very minimally, only to show the location of the incident and to portrait a short activity of one survivor. There are a few still photographs of a not too busy street, maybe to illustrate the car with which the unlawful arrest was effected, a photograph

of the grave cross of a victim of torture, and a photograph of a traditional village. Music plays at the beginning, in between the testimonies, and at end of the documentary. The survivors are recorded from frontal angle while giving detailed accounts of the torture, chronologically and soberly. They recount, and sometimes perform, what has been done to them and recount what they heard.

In contrast with *LtOV*, *OFG* makes use of various footage for many purposes. There is footage of the rebels throwing bullets out of their guns, the child soldiers sporting their guns, blurred images of running feet, and more. Not only does it illustrate, it dramatizes the survivors' testimony. For example, when a survivor says what a total chaos the town was, the image changes into a hand-held, slow-shutter speed, shot of a bamboo winnowing tray falling out of hands and feet running chaotically. The effect is a dramatic reenactment of a past event. The camera also zooms in when a survivor covers her face with two hands, unable to continue her story. In short, *OFG* is using more filmic conventions in representing the incident, whereas *LtOV* can be compared to a testimony before a trial: plain and formal.

The differences between the visual representations of *LtOV* and *OFG* is in keeping with the differences of their verbal representation. Each of the survivors in *LtOV* is described in detail to suggest a factual account. For example, the first testimony is given by, "Peto Perius Wenda, farmer, the survivor of Kimbim Case 2005." He begins his testimony, "[o]n Friday, 29 July 2005, I went to Pyramid market to purchase some supplies." His testimony is structured around the fact that on that date he was tortured. He, in effect, becomes an object of his act of giving testimony. The "I" of the story is presented as an element of the fact, in a distant and objective account. It stands in contrast with the verbal structure of *OFG*. The survivor here is presented under a pseudonym; the first survivor is "Hana." There is no additional information. She begins her testimony with, "One night, we heard a lot of screaming." The testimony follows her, what she did, what was done to her, and how she felt. It is structured around her experience, without bothering to name the exact date, place, and action, or chronological details of the incident. The "I" of the story is not dissociated from the I of the teller.

Group A's initial reaction to *LtOV* was divided into "surprised" (*kaget, terkejut*) and "unsurprised" (*tidak kaget, tidak terkejut*). The Indonesian word *kaget* or *terkejut* is usually used to express a state of mind and, less likely, state of the body when a person learns of unexpected information, or experiences a sudden change of circumstance. In this context, the participants used the word *kaget* or *tidak kaget* to refer to their state of mind having, or not having, learned of new information about torture in Papua. They adopted the position offered by *LtOV*, namely to learn about suffering as an impersonal fact. The participants' reservation note, as it is mentioned in the report section, concerning the factuality of the case, also supports this conclusion.

Differing from their responses to *LtOV*, some of the participants' responses to *OFG* were anger and speechlessness. Their bodily gestures showed that they did not only learn new facts, but also "experienced" the suffering. There is no equivalent word in Indonesian to express the bodily response to an unexpected change of events. Sometimes Indonesians borrow the English word to express their reaction, namely *shocked*. The quality lies not in a person's knowledge of the new information, but in how she experiences it. Therefore, whether a person has or does not have knowledge about the fact is irrelevant here. Because, as was said by a physician in *OFG*, "We were not taken by surprise, but this doesn't mean that we were not shocked." Although a few of the participants in both groups had known about the incidents from

news media, popular feature films, and the internet about rape in war, they were still shocked.

The display of pain in human rights documentary is essential, but it is not an end in itself. Based on the premise that “pain is universal,” the display of pain is intended to “create solidarity out of difference”.⁶ The solidarity is achieved through the construction of a discursive space where similar identities can be manifested. But, the similar identities can only be understood if they are simultaneously defined against what is not included, or against what differs from them. This is what Törrönen calls the spatial aspect of subject position.⁷ The documentaries construct subject positions for the audiences by categorizing reality into “us” and “them.”

Table 1: The images of “us” and “them” in the documentaries.

	Us	Them
<i>LtOV</i>	Civilians, citizens, Indonesians (not Papuans), human rights defender	Military and police forces, state, human rights abuser
<i>OFG</i>	Female, rape victims/survivors, civilians	Male, rapist, rebel soldiers

My analysis of *LtOV* shows that the space of *us*, what our value is as a society, is defined against what is not. The space of *us* is the space of the civilians whose human rights have been abused by the state. All of the survivors were characterized by their identity as Indonesians, citizens, who have the rights to be protected, not to be tortured, by the state. Three out of four survivors speak Indonesian and all of them were interviewed in a neutral background (a front door of a house, a porch, a green field) using regular, not traditional, outfits. They are not, in any way, represented as Papuan; they are Indonesians in Papua. In *OFG* the survivors are clearly shown as female civilians who were raped by male rebel soldiers. The state stands in an ambiguous position since it invites the rebels to join the election to prevent further conflicts. This upsets the human rights defenders because if the crimes go unpunished, it sends a strong signal that they are justifiable.

In the words of one participant,

But the similar condition can be found in every part of Indonesia. Not only in Papua. I mean, the despotism seems to be universal for military personnel. I don't know if it's because of their lack of education so that they can only use ... [violence]

This participant surveyed the whole country of Indonesia in her mind and concluded that the incident can be found not only in Papua, but in every part of country as well. In so doing, she drew the line that delineated *us*, civilians, from *them*, the military. The spatial aspect of subject position lays the basis for attaching values that separate civilians from the military. The participants considered military personnel to be more prone to frustration, to the use of inhuman and violent techniques, to obeying the hierarchical chain of commands, and not well educated. With regard to torture, the military personnel's actions were seen as a question of organizational misconduct. It is in the nature of military and police force to use violence in their operation. However, it has to be justified and carefully monitored. Due to their lack of education and high levels of stress, individual soldier might have conducted maltreatment. Nonetheless, the root of the problem was still attributed to the organization.

Differing from the perpetrators in *LtOV*, the perpetrators of rape in *OFG* were in the militia. Although they were equipped with military weapons, uniforms, and conducted military operations, they were not recruited by the legal government.

Therefore, they did not have the exclusive right to exert force in their duty. Violence is not the nature of their job. The root of their violence, then, must be attributed not to their organization, but to their motives. Despite their same status as civilians, the participants drew the boundary between themselves and the rebel soldier based on their internal tendency to commit crimes, susceptibility to the machination of the elites, and their irrational and animalistic instincts. This supports the argument that the value of *us* is defined against what is not us, namely the rebel's characteristics.

Sympathy

How do the audiences develop the feeling toward the suffering distant others? Drawing from Adam Smith's work *The Theory of Moral Sentiment*, Boltanski argues that the distance between the spectator and the suffering other can be linked by deliberately imagine the feeling of the suffering others, who is otherwise unconnected to us.⁸ The state of "feeling" the other's suffering is called sympathy. Nevertheless, sympathy is not born of a magic capacity with which we can feel what the other feels. It is an act of imagination to "represent to himself the sentiments and sensations of the sufferer."⁹ It is clear that the definition still maintain the distinction between us the seer and them the sufferer. In fact, there has to be a distance, a difference, between the audiences and the sufferers.

With regard to this study, my aim was to learn how the Indonesian audiences receive the distance between themselves and the Papuans and the Sierra Leoneans in the human rights documentary and how they use discursive resources to overcome the distance. The previous discussion shows that the audiences draw categories of "us" and "them" and attach values that differentiate one category from the other. Of importance in the process is the audience's reception of the categorizations made by the documentaries, or whether the audiences adopt the categorizations that the documentaries offered.

However, the categorizations only lay the foundation for the audiences' response. Because the suffering others are strangers to the audiences and live in a distant place, the audiences need to generalize their feeling. And in order to generalize, "[It] becomes eloquent, recognizing and discovering itself as emotion and feeling."¹⁰ This "emotion and feeling" is what I call sympathy here. The term sympathy was expressed fairly often by participants.

In the focus groups discussion setting, two categorizations can be identified. The first pair of categories is the category of "us" and "them" that is constructed by the documentary's narrative. The second pair of categories is the category of "us" and "them" that is brought about by the group's dynamics. The "us" in the first category is further divided into another "us" and "them." In the following paragraphs I will attempt to analyze the issue of sympathy by drawing from one aspect of subject positions, that is categories.

In explaining the category that the audiences employ to differentiate themselves from the survivors in *LtOV*, or Papuans, it is instructive to read the work of James T. Siegel on the Jakarta riot in 1998 when many private and public properties were looted, burnt with strollers and looters in them, and allegedly many Chinese women were raped. He says that Indonesian culture is racist in a different way from the European culture. European culture excludes and repels a part of its identity that it finds intolerable, whereas Indonesian culture forces to include a part of it to become better Indonesians. Within this logic, Chinese-Indonesians are seen to be inviting their own trouble because it is their wealth that causes intolerance of them.

The othering of the other within the Indonesian identity does not only target the Chinese, but also the separatists. In his analysis on the discourse of the separatists in Indonesian academic and journalistic works, Dave McRae argues that the separatists in Aceh, Papua, and East Timor are seen as “less developed,” “inferior,” and needing “guidance.”¹¹ Even the separatists are seen as not having a true political motive, but only employing it to achieve other ends, for example economic motives or to redress injustices. Peter King’s fieldwork in Papua on the issue of separatism also supports this argument.¹² He sees that Indonesians in Papua regard the native Papuans as backwards and as aliens.

These existing discourses in Indonesian academic work, media, and daily life conversations provide resources from which the audiences draw to express how they receive the survivors in *LtOV*. Although nowhere in the video are the survivors pictured as Papuans, but as Indonesians who live Papua, the audiences draw the difference between themselves and the Papuans based on their previous knowledge of Papuans. They are the same as Indonesians, but at the same time different. In the categories constructed by *LtOV*, the “us” is Indonesian. But in order to feel sympathy towards them, in order to overcome the distance, and in order to generalize their feelings towards all the actual and potential survivors, the audiences adopted further categorizations. Accordingly, the new pair of categories is “us” the “modern” Indonesians, as opposed to “them,” the “backward” Indonesians. Or, in McRae’s analysis, the “genuine” and the “inferior” Indonesians. By adopting the categories, the audiences created a space to imagine and express their feelings toward Papuans, the other of themselves.

Table 2: The images of “us” and “them” in the discussion.

	Us - Modern/ genuine Indonesian autonomic	Them - Backward/ inferior Indonesian dependent
Social motives		
Social relationships	suspicious/cautious	trusting, innocent
Social institutions	rule-regulated	somewhat arbitrary

It is useful to employ the three dimensions of the categories as postulated by Törrönen, namely social motives, relationships, and institutions, to further analyze how sympathy was developed by the audiences.¹³ The participants differentiate themselves, and thus ascribing values to their identity, from the Papuans who are dependent on the superiors, trusting toward strangers, and less regulated. The participants thought that Papuans cannot control themselves, let alone develop and educate themselves. They need a central effort from the national government to intervene in their development. They are uneducated and, therefore, easily believe in strangers as well. Their tribalism greatly hampers the enforcement of law. Therefore, for example, it made sense to one participant to argue that the incidents were local/tribal in nature and could not be generalized to the other tribes. The same argument about Papuan’s tribalism was even stretched further to make a case about their inability to educate themselves. And the other participants agreed on this point.

With regard to *LtOV*’s claim that torture was wide-spread, the participant refuted the claim and argued that this torture must be local in nature. This argument was not based on competing evidence, but on a general assumption of the structure of Papuan society. That is, the localized and isolated nature of the society makes every incident independent of other incidents.

Again, although nowhere in the documentaries are the survivors pictured as primitive, the participants readily supplied their own imagination of them as such. In the participants' imagination, many of Papuans were still using natural resources just to survive, depending on their stone-age technology, dressing naturally, and were subjected to the will of a promiscuous leader. Therefore, when one participant pitied the Papuans for the torture and for being a Papuan, as I reported above, it was not a senseless statement. Nor was the juxtaposition incidental. On the contrary, it was essential. To empathize with the Papuans, for whatever reasons, it is essential for the Indonesians to invoke their existing discourse about Papuans. The dominant discourse of Papuan constructs them as the underdeveloped and, thus, the ideal object of pity.

The distance between *us* and *them* is essential for the capacity of sympathy. The capacity to impart sympathy will be hampered if *us* cannot recognize our difference from *them*. One participant who had a similar experience, being arbitrarily searched and mistreated by the military in Aceh, accepted the incidents as "unsurprising" because they were like his experience. He drew parallels between his circumstance and the Papuan's. Both of them were mistreated, both of them still had "primitive" sections of society, and they demanded independence to get the central government's attention. It was not that he did not have the capacity for empathy, he claimed, but it was hard. In short, the distance was too close.

How do the Indonesian audiences sympathize with survivors of *OFG*? If the documentary divides categories into two, namely female-survivors and male-rebels, do the participants adopt those categories? It is true that the male participants did not feel the same pain, and in so doing failed to adopt the category of "us," for the female-rape-survivor. But, their failure to feel the same pain did not mean that they could not impart their sympathy. Quite the contrary, they were perfectly able to sympathize with the survivors.

Since sympathy does not require similarity of experience, the male participants can fully imagine the survivor's suffering. The question, then, is, how did they imagine the rape survivor's suffering? How did they construct the categorization between themselves and the survivors?

It turned out that the male participants' categories largely converged with the female participants' categories. The male participants' constructed simple categories of the fortunate and the unfortunate, the principal element of pity. On the other hand, the female participants did not articulate "backwardness" and the "pitifulness" as they did with the Papuans. In other words, they disarticulated, or decoupled, the two discourses when they imagined the Sierra Leonean women. What causes the decoupling is open to discussion. But in my opinion the answer is to do with the availability of the discourse of Sierra Leonean, be it because of their lack of knowledge of them or of simple inattention to the issue.

Conclusion

I argue in this paper that pain, an essential element of human rights documentary, plays an important role in the forging of audiences' affinity with the survivors. However, the reception of pain is not a natural and spontaneous process. The Indonesian audiences used discursive resources, such as elements of narrative and mass media's discourse, to build commonalities that lay foundations for their ability to "feel for" the survivors. The audiences forge solidarity with rape victims based on their gender, whereas with torture victims they build solidarity based on their citizenship.

With regard to sympathy, as a general feeling for the distant others, the

audiences draw further the line that distinguishes them from the survivors. Drawing their knowledge from media, the audiences reproduced paternalistic relationship with inferior Papuans, whereas they pitied the Sierra Leonean women's unfortunate lives as equal human for lack of knowledge of them. Knowledge of the victim's life, then, shaped how the Indonesian audiences felt their sympathy toward the victims.

¹ M McLagan, 'Principles, publicity, and politics: Notes on human rights media'. *American Anthropologist*, vol 105, 2003, pp. 605-612.

² McLagan. p. 608.

³ McLagan. p. 606-608. M McLagan, 'Introduction: Making human rights claim public'. *American Anthropologist*, vol 108, 2006, p. 191.

⁴ McLagan. p. 607. L Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 3-17.

⁵ McLagan, p. 607.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ J Törrönen, 'The concept of subject position in empirical social research'. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, vol 31, 2001, pp. 313-329.

⁸ Boltanski, p. 38.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Boltanski, p. 6.

¹¹ D McRae, 'A discourse on separatists'. *Indonesia*, vol 74, 2002, pp. 37-58.

¹² P Peter King, 'Morning star rising?: *Indonesia Raya* and the new Papuan nationalism'. *Indonesia*, vol 73, 2002, pp. 89-127.

¹³ Törrönen, pp. 320-321.

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