

THE MEDIA AS DEVELOPMENT "TEXTBOOK":
A CASE STUDY ON INFORMATION DISTORTION IN
THE DEBATE ABOUT THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF
AN INDONESIAN DAM

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by
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The objective to do this dissertation was to obtain an understanding of the nature of public discourse about the social consequences of large development projects as mediated by the printed media. The publicity surrounding the displacement of local villagers by Kedungombo, a medium-sized irrigation dam in Central Java, Indonesia, was selected as a "magnifying lens" to look into the media coverage of similar large development projects built during the New Order administration.

The findings of this case study shows how the wide spectrum of adverse social effects and resistance to them were reduced into a dramatic story about the persistent resistance of one hamlet community, Kedungpring, to three overlapping government policies: unfair compensation, forced resettlement, and a prohibition to inhabit and cultivate the reservoir's green belt.

This simplistic picture developed out of four levels of Information distortion by the media in conjunction with the advocates and critics of the dam. First, they repeatedly claimed that massive grass roots resistance to large dams had not happened before during the New Order administration, which is incorrect. Second, they underemphasized the grass roots resistance to the project site, outside that particular hamlet. Third, they underemphasized various other adverse social effects experienced by the

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people living around the reservoir, apart from forced resettlement. Fourth, they underemphasized the impact of the entire irrigation project, of which the dam was only one component, upon the local villagers living in the dam's command area as well as the impact of resettling the displaced villagers upon the host population in a watershed in Bengkulu, Southern Sumatra. This Information distortion was the result of the interplay of various media strategies carried out by the dam advocates as well as the critics, supported and amplified by the media. In addition, various political, cultural, and economic forces outside the media influenced the coverage of the Kedungombo dam as well.

Based on the findings of this thesis, some theoretical implications in the fields of education, political language, and social impact analysis are forwarded. In addition, the thesis also recommend certain practical suggestions to the anti-Kedungombo activists, who have embarked on campaigns to halt the construction of two new large dams in Indonesia.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

George Junus Aditjondro was born in Pekalongan, Central Java, Indonesia, on May 27, 1946. After dropping out from the Electrical Engineering Department at the Satya Wacana Christian University in Salatiga, Central Java, he worked as a journalist for the weekly magazine *Tempo* for nine years (1971-1979). He considers this magazine to be his second alma mater. Leaving the magazine in 1979 to help set up a rural development organization, INDHRRA (Indonesian Secretariate for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas), he worked for two years to develop the communication skills of various nongovernmental organizations in Indonesia.

From 1981 until 1982, he was enrolled at the International Agriculture and Rural Development Program at Cornell University as a Hubert H. Humphrey Fellow, and took courses in rural sociology. Fresh from Cornell's Ag School, he resumed his rural development career in Irian Jaya (Western New Guinea), where he worked for five years to develop the communication and research skills of his fellow community development workers.

In 1987, he went back to Cornell's upper campus for the second time, this time enrolled in the Education Department, taking Adult Education as his major in conjunction with International Agriculture and Southeast Asian Studies as his major. In April 1989, he defended his M.S. thesis, which unraveled the theory of action of the organization which he had cofounded in Irian Jaya, namely the Irian Jaya Rural Community Development

Foundation (YPMD Irian Jaya). After taking his A-Exam in July 1989, he first went back to the field in Indonesia, to take a broader and deeper look at the emerging social movements in Java. While being in the field, he embarked on a new career, namely as lecturer at the Post-Graduate Program at one of his former alma maters, the Satya Wacana Christian University, from which position he could still support the off-campus social movements, and still be able to serve Eastern Indonesian communities indirectly through the Eastern Indonesian student community at Satya Wacana. After finishing his Ph.D. at Cornell University — his third alma mater — he will begin his full-time teaching job at the small campus in the cool town on the foot of the hills in Salatiga, which always reminds him of the two university towns where he had spent the last ten years: Abepura, the campus town of Cenderawasih University in Irian Jaya and, of course, Ithaca.

dedicated to all victims of the large dam industry
in Indonesia,
especially the forgotten ones:
the construction workers
and the indigenous peoples
who were uprooted from
their customary forests and waters,
to accomodate
the dam victims
from Java

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Academic-wise, this thesis research benefited from two contesting -- yet, complementary — approaches to my intellect and emotions: the heart-lifting patience of my adviser, Prof. David Deshler, and the iron-tempering-cold-blooded challenging critics of Prof. Ben Anderson, my second committee member.

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Before leaving Indonesia in late August 1991, I was reminded by a colleague, J. C. ("Pongke") Princen, with a Dutch saying, *de een zijn nood is de ander zijn brood* (one's suffering is some else's source of living), when he heard that I was planning to write my dissertation on Kedungombo. Hopefully I have always kept his reminder in mind.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE:	
INTRODUCTION	1
 CHAPTER TWO:	
SETTING	34
 CHAPTER THREE:	
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	64
 CHAPTER FOUR:	
TWO GENERAL MEDIA STRATEGIES APPLIED BY THE DAM ADVOCATES	75
 CHAPTER FIVE:	
SPECIFIC MEDIA STRATEGIES APPLIED BY THE DAM ADVOCATES TO JUSTIFY THE DEPOPULATED GREEN BELT POLICY	118
 CHAPTER SIX:	
SIX MEDIA STRATEGIES APPLIED BY DAM CRIHCS	148
 CHAPTER SEVEN:	
TWO MEDIA STRATEGIES APPLIED BY DAM CRITICS AND DAM ADVOCATES, AS WELL AS THE MEDIA	171
 CHAPTER EIGHT:	
UNDERREPORTED INFORMATION RELATED TO KEDUNGOMBO	213

CHAPTER NINE:	
FINDINGS.....	280
CHAPTER TEN:	
CONCLUSION.....	303
APPENDIX ONE:	
SELECTIVE CASES OF GRASS-ROOTS RESISTANCE AGAINST DAM, WEIR, AND RESERVOIR PROJECTS IN INDONESIA DURING THE NEW ORDER, EXCLUDING THE KEDUNGOMBO DAM	321
APPENDIX TWO:	
CASES OF GRASS ROOTS RESISTANCE AGAINST OTHER RIVER ENGINEERING PROJECTS IN INDONESIA, SINCE THE NEW ORDER, OUTSIDE THE JRATUNSELUNA REGION.....	351
BIBLIOGRAPHY	370

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Percentage of households in the 22 villages which were to be affected by the Kedungombo dam and reservoir (July 1977)	12
Table 2. The circulation of major printed media that covered Kedungombo in the Indonesian and Javanese languages (1987).....	26
Table 3. Death tolls of villagers during the construction of two major dam projects in Central Java	48
Table 4, Cases of villagers' protests against adverse impacts of the Jatunseluna irrigation facilities, downstream of the Kedungombo dam	100
Table 5. Population density and agrarian population density of the 22 villages before the impoundment of the Kedungombo reservoir (July 1977).....	122
Table 6. Agro-ecosystem of the 22 villages before the impoundment of the Kedungombo reservoir area (August 1977)	123
Table 7. Kedungombo's physical dimensions, compared to some other major dams in Central Java.....	194

Table 8.	
A chronology of cases where Indonesian villagers took government officials and agencies as well as dam-building and river-dredging agencies to court, apart from cases related to the Jratunseluna Project	203
Table 9.	
List of persons who had drowned in the Kedungombo reservoir from March 1989 to 9 April 1992	223
Table 10.	
Some other Indonesian reservoirs in which frequent drowning incidents had been documented by the media..... ..	227
Table 11.	
List of the Jratunseluna irrigation structures downstream of the Kedungombo dam, in which drowning accidents had been reported by the media from 1990 until March 1992	235
Table 12.	
Cases of social unrest in relation to the appropriation of indigenous people's land in the district of North Bengkulu by various government and private projects, apart from the Air Manjuntio scheme	240
Table 13.	
Death tolls of workers during the construction of some major Indonesian dams, as recorded by the mainstream media and technical bulletins	247
Table 14.	
Forestry land lost to six major reservoirs in Central Java, including their green belts and local resettlement schemes.....	251

LIST OF MAPS

Map 1:	
The location of Kedungombo dam and other	
irrigation facilities of the Jratunseluna River Basin	
Development Project in Central Java	
.....	15
Map 2:	
A detailed view of the Jratunseluna irrigation	
facilities downstream of Kedungombo	
.....	16