



Effectiveness of Open Letter Communication by Journalists as a Social Control Function in Central Kalimantan

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Keywords:

Social control
Strategy
Open letter

Received: August 2024

Accepted: September 2024

Published: September 2024

Abstract

Based on Law Number 40 of 1999, chapter 3 paragraph (1) states that the National Press has the function of being a medium for information, education, entertainment, and social control. To support the performance of news coverage by a journalist to obtain information about the desired news, namely news that is good, true, accurate, factual worthy of dissemination, the goal will be achieved if it is determined by having a strategy so that the social control function runs effectively. Journalists need a strategy, one of which is writing an open letter addressed to the government or the highest official who is the object of the news. The aim is to break the dead end of social control because so far, according to several reports, the control function is not working as it should.

To achieve the goal of ensuring that the function of the press as social control is effective, one of the strategies is through Open Letters. The research method used is descriptive qualitative, with triangulated data collection, namely observation, and interview documentation. With the results of research and discussion using the concept of Harold D Lasswell's theory, communication consists of five elements, namely communicator, communicant, message, and media effect. Journalists in carrying out their function of reporting on social control are guided by Law 40 of 1999 concerning the Press and the journalistic code of ethics. To achieve effective goals, reporting should not only be done once. However, there are times when authorized officials do not respond. So journalists write readers' letters directly through the mass media to the targeted officials. In conclusion, the open letter/reader was carried out by journalists as part of the climax of the non-response to news about social control by officials. After the news was broadcast several times. Advice to journalists to write readers' letters when their news doesn't get a response.



INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country where its mass media has rapidly developed. Mass media can certainly influence the thoughts and actions of the public regarding the impact of mass communication on societal perceptions, knowledge, behavior, and attitudes. Media also acts as a socialization agent or disseminator of values that plays various important roles in the transmission of attitudes, thoughts, and interactional relationships (Mulyana, 2001 in Wibawa, 2020).

The press, as the fourth pillar of democracy alongside the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, plays a crucial role in the functioning of a democratic state. The press serves to maintain the balance among the pillars of state administration and serves as a means for society to oversee the governance entrusted to state officials (Arafat & Fathurrahman, 2023).

Sutri (2023) states that mass media is a social institution and communication channel that carries out journalistic activities. Besides its roles in providing information, education, and entertainment, mass media also serves a social control function. Its educational role includes writings that contain knowledge and insights. There are four functions of mass media as social control embedded in democratic principles: (1) social participation (citizen involvement in governance), (2) social responsibility (government accountability to the people), (3) social support (public support for governance), and (4) social control (community oversight of government actions). The role of mass media is crucial and inseparable from society. In

democratic societies, the dissemination of information enjoys freedom and is protected by law. Thus, media is a vital instrument for democratic states, and mass media significantly contributes to social control, especially concerning language use in news reporting.

Based on Article 3, Paragraph (1) of Law Number 40 Year 1999, National Press functions as an information, education, entertainment, and social control medium (Lubis & Koto, 2020). The role of media as social control refers to its ability to influence, direct, and monitor individual and societal behaviors and values. In this regard, media has the power to shape public opinion, influence perceptions, and affect social decisions made by the public. One critical aspect of media's role as social control is its watchdog function. Media serves as a guardian or overseer of power and governance. By providing critical and objective coverage of government actions, media can expose policies that are inappropriate, abuses of power, or corrupt behavior harmful to society. Thus, media helps maintain transparency and accountability in social and political systems. Media functions as a monitor, mediator, connector, and communication facilitator between society and government. However, challenges such as political bias, commercial interests, and media regulations need to be addressed for effective media control of conflicts and promotion of peace and sustainable development. To maintain media's effective role as social control, it is crucial to promote independent, diverse, and responsible media. Proper regulation, press freedom, and high media literacy are key to maximizing the positive contribution of media as social control (Setiadarma & Priambodo, 2023).

The profession of a journalist requires hard work and dedication, as it involves various aspects and locations of reporting. Journalists must fulfill their role as social control agents (Arafat & Fathurrahman, 2023).

A journalist is someone who regularly performs journalistic tasks. "Regularly" implies working according to ethical codes of conduct, adhering to the mandate of national press laws, conducting respectful research and news gathering, and writing according to journalistic standards. The duty of a journalist is to present news that is interesting, thorough, current, concise, and clear, with vitality, presented in lively and nimble language, simple, or better known as popular language style. In terms of providing information, journalism is not about pursuing the truth in an absolute or philosophical sense, but it can and must pursue the truth in a practical sense. This journalistic truth is a process that must start with professional discipline in fact gathering and verification. Journalists then strive to convey this meaning in a fair and credible report, applicable for the present and suitable for further investigation. Journalists must be transparent about their sources and methods so that audiences can assess the information presented (Wajong, 2018; Hendra, 2019).

There is so much data that must be collected by a journalist in writing a news story. Therefore, a strategy is needed. Strategy is a very important factor in various aspects, to obtain results in accordance with what has been planned. The formulated strategy must offer alternatives to solving problems, not only conceptually but also operationally. Essentially, strategy is a plan and management to achieve goals. However, to achieve these goals, strategy is not only a roadmap showing directions. Instead, it must also show operational tactics (Istiqayana, 2019). In supporting the performance of news coverage by a journalist to obtain information about the desired news, namely good, true, accurate, factual, and suitable news, of course, this goal will be achieved if determined with the strategy. To ensure effective social control function, journalists need strategies, one of which is to create an Open Letter addressed to the government or senior officials who are the subject of the news.

An open letter, according to Integra Technology Solutions (2023), is a letter whose contents can be read by anyone and is not kept confidential. This type of letter is usually used to convey messages or statements to the public or to deliver an open message to a specific person or institution. In an open letter, there are no specific requirements; it is addressed to another party, whether individuals or groups, and is typically published in mass media.

There are several reasons why someone chooses to write an open letter, including: to openly criticize something and as an effort to focus public attention on the letter's recipient (Howard et al., 2022).

Noviandry (2022) in his study titled "Digital Activism in Marcus Rashford's Open Letter" states that an open letter functions as a call to action, inspiring individuals and communities to stand in solidarity with Rashford's efforts. He examines the digital activism undertaken by Marcus Rashford through his open letter to the British Parliament, urging them to extend the food voucher scheme for schoolchildren during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rashford's open letter successfully influenced policy changes by the UK government.

Asmabuasappe et al. (2022) in their research on an open letter and petition written by Indonesian citizens in support of PT Freeport employees, addressed to President Joko Widodo. The purpose of the letter and petition was to urge President Joko Widodo to promptly resolve labor disputes and criminal actions committed by PT Freeport Indonesia. The ideological significance of the open letter and petition to President Joko Widodo regarding the fate of PT Freeport Indonesia employees emphasized the need for protection and assistance to ensure their rights as employees are fulfilled according to applicable laws. This illustrates that the letter and petition primarily discuss the employees of PT Freeport Indonesia who require more attention from the government or President Joko Widodo, aiming to convey the cognition, emotion, and perception experienced by these employees to gain sympathy and assistance from the government.

To ensure that social control functions effectively and to break the deadlock of social control due to several reports where the control functions did not run as expected, these are the objectives and background reasons for creating an open letter by researchers as one of the strategies in this study.

The case studies in this research include an open letter to the Chief of Police regarding the mistaken arrest of three residents of Tumbang Kalemei Village, Central Katingan District, Katingan Regency, Central Kalimantan Province. Another open letter is directed to the Chief of Police of Palangka Raya regarding a nightlife establishment operating beyond its permit amid the increasing number of COVID-19 patients.

The aim is to ensure that the social control exercised by journalists is truly heard and addressed by relevant officials in accordance with applicable regulations.

METHODOLOGY

This study examines open letters or reader letters that occurred in Central Kalimantan and some in other countries. This type of research utilizes a descriptive method with a qualitative approach. The research describes and depicts a phenomenon related to the connection between news reporting and open letters or reader letters.

According to Sugiyono (2020:9), qualitative research is a method used to investigate naturally occurring conditions of the object. The researcher's position as a key instrument, data collection techniques involve triangulation through observation, documentation, and interviews. Data analysis is inductive, focusing more on meanings rather than generalizations.

Meanwhile, Bogdan and Biklen in Sugiyono (2020:7) define qualitative descriptive research as the collection of data in the form of words or images, disregarding numbers. The data obtained from triangulation is analyzed descriptively to facilitate understanding for others. This study focuses on presenting open letters that have an impact on decision-makers or officials.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, three sources I interviewed were H. Haris Sadikin, S.I.Kom as the Editor-in-Chief of Harian Palangka Post/also Vice Chairman of the Indonesian Journalists Association (PWI) Central Board for Regional Development, Muhammad Zainal, SH Chairman of PWI Central Kalimantan Branch/Editor-in-Chief of Inikalteng.Com, and Dede Septajaya Stringer of Liputan 6 SCTV Central Kalimantan Bureau.

Based on the interview with Haris Sadikin, he mentioned that news is one of the products generated in journalistic activities. The creation of news must go through journalistic processes as stipulated in Article 1 Paragraph 1 of Law No. 40 of 1999 concerning the press. The journalistic activities include seeking, acquiring, possessing, storing, processing, and disseminating information in various forms such as text, sound, images, audiovisuals, data, graphics, and other forms, using print media, electronic media, and all available channels.

"Because news is a product of journalism, it becomes an essential component in social institutions and mass communication channels, commonly known as the press. As stated in Article 3 Paragraph 1 of Law No. 40 of 1999, the function of the press includes serving as a medium of information, education, entertainment, and social control."

According to Haris Sadikin, as a product of the press, news created through journalistic activities, whether in the form of text, sound, images, or audiovisuals, must fulfill at least one of the four defined functions. If it fails to meet any of these functions, it cannot be considered journalistic work or news.

Among the four functions of the press, social control is particularly crucial. Its role as social control establishes the press as a balancing force in societal life. This function of control serves as a watchdog over various components of society, including governance, law enforcement, finances, policies, and more.

Therefore, it is imperative for the press to produce journalistic works in the form of news that emphasize social control. It is not surprising that many journalistic works produced by journalists focus on social issues as a means of controlling policies, law enforcement, and other aspects.

The issue often encountered is that journalistic products sometimes rely solely on statements from sources. As a result, they are considered ordinary information by the public. The purpose of creating journalistic works should be to fulfill the function of social control, but this goal often receives insufficient response.

Journalistic products that rely solely on statements from sources typically receive delayed responses. However, if a news piece is based on factual disclosures and data, the response tends to be different.

"However, it must be acknowledged that reader letters often receive quicker responses. Reader letters contain opinions from the writers with clear targets. In contrast, news articles often do not clearly specify their intended audience. They may aim to inform specific officials or simply provide information. Moreover, news relying solely on statements from sources is different from investigative journalism or in-depth reporting, which has clear objectives. The disclosure of facts in such works also specifies their intended audience."

According to Muhammad Zainal based on the interview, a reader letter is a letter written by readers and submitted to the editorial office of mass media for publication. Reader letters contain criticisms, suggestions, and responses published in newspapers or magazines and written by their readers. Reader letters are published if they meet the criteria set by the target media, such as including a copy of the writer's ID card, a passport-sized photograph, and other requirements.

On the other hand, news is information or a report by journalists about current events or incidents disseminated through mass media to the public. In short, reader letters contain responses/criticisms/suggestions from readers regarding an event, incident, or issue. Meanwhile, news is a journalist's report on current events or incidents.

Directly submitting a reader letter to the media may not always be appropriate. Ideally, if a journalist reports on negative actions by officials and receives no response from them, the journalist should conduct investigations to gather additional data and evidence, seek opinions from other competent sources, including law enforcement authorities.

"If these steps are ineffective, only then should a reader letter be addressed to the concerned officials. If still ineffective, one could try an open letter addressed to higher-ranking officials than those initially addressed."

According to Dede Septajaya, a stringer for Liputan 6 SCTV Central Kalimantan Bureau, he strongly supports journalists in carrying out their role of social control through reporting, as stated in Article 3 Paragraph 1 of Law No. 40/1999 concerning the Press, which explains that the national press functions as a medium of information, education, entertainment, and social control. Through social control based on factual occurrences and with competent sources, the truth can usually be established.

"Admittedly, not all news aimed at social control receives a positive response from the individuals or institutions under scrutiny, often due to the ego of the institution's leaders who are the subject of the report and their desire to conceal misconduct within their ranks. Moreover, when the individual or leader in question is suspected to be involved in the reported issue, socially controlling news can sometimes pass like the wind.

An open letter serves as an alternative to ensure that the function of social control, as mandated by Article 3 Paragraph 1 of Law No. 40/1999 concerning the Press, operates as journalists envision. Typically, journalists do not immediately resort to open letters regarding ongoing subjects of their reports; instead, they resort to them when their attempts at social control through reporting prove ineffective. These open letters consolidate multiple published reports and incorporate opinions related to the established facts.

In some cases, open letters carry more weight and are more likely to be heard by the highest leadership of the targeted institutions, as journalists often strive to ensure their open letters are directly read by these top officials. Open letters also tend to be more assertive and daring in exposing actual facts, as journalists can freely articulate verified facts without relying on sources and inserting their own opinions or judgments.

Based on observed cases, the emergence of open letters crafted by researchers does not happen abruptly but typically follows attempts at socially controlling reporting that fail to receive appropriate responses, as per the established rules. Consequently, after several unsuccessful attempts, researchers may resort to a case study by composing an open letter addressed to the highest-ranking official targeted in the reporting.

One such open letter arose from the mistaken arrest of three residents of Tumbang Kalemei Village, Katingan Tengah District, Katingan Regency, Central Kalimantan Province, on March 3, 2022. They were accused of stealing oil palm fruit belonging to PT Karya Dewi Putra by police and company security guards and subsequently became suspects detained

at the Katingan District Police Station. However, following information gathered and interviews with relevant sources, including Garinda, the wife of Jaya, one of the wrongfully arrested villagers, it was revealed that her husband was mistakenly arrested while transporting oil palm fruit for Nur Jaya Sukah, the Village Head of Tumbang Kalemei. In an interview, Nur Jaya Sukah confirmed that the three villagers were indeed wrongfully arrested, as they were carrying palm fruit from his plantation, not from PT Karya Dewi Putra.

Despite the Katingan District Police and Central Kalimantan Regional Police suspecting them of theft and detaining them, as a journalist, I and several colleagues conducted an investigation and reported the facts on the ground, confirming their wrongful arrest. We requested the police release them, and with the assistance of Desmond Junaidi Mahaesa (Deputy Chairman of Commission III of the Indonesian House of Representatives), they were released with their detention suspended after 22 days.

However, during the suspension process, the Katingan Tengah Police Chief persisted in pursuing the case to trial by summoning the suspects for interrogation. Consequently, the researchers attempted a case study by drafting an open letter addressed to the Chief of the Indonesian National Police (Kapolri).

On April 12, 2022, the researchers drafted an open letter to General Listyo Sigit Prabowo, the Chief of the Indonesian National Police, published in several print and online media outlets, titled "OPEN LETTER TO GENERAL LISTYOSIGIT PRABOWO: PLEASE STOP THE CASE OF ALLEGED WRONGFUL ARREST OF 3 (THREE) RESIDENTS OF TUMBANG KALEMEI VILLAGE."

The essence of the open letter clarified that the three residents of Tumbang Kalemei were wrongfully arrested, yet the police insisted on prosecuting them. The researchers affirmed that all information presented was factual and expressed willingness to face legal consequences if the open letter was proven false or defamatory.

To ensure the open letter reached the Chief of Police and was read, the researchers utilized their network to guarantee its delivery. After reviewing the open letter, General Listyo Sigit Prabowo ordered the Katingan Tengah Police to adhere to regulations. Consequently, on April 25, 2022, Jaya, one of the suspects, received a Decision to Terminate Investigation (SP3), indicating the cessation of the theft case alleged against him.

It is suspected that the open letter delivered by the researchers prompted the recipients to make a significant decision regarding the public interest, instructing their subordinates at the Katingan Tengah Police to operate within the boundaries of the law.

On February 7, 2022, researchers published an open letter titled "OPEN LETTER TO THE CHIEF OF PALANGKA RAYA POLICE RESORT."

The contents of the open letter conveyed to the Chief of Police that O2 Kafe and Bar nightclub, located at Jalan Tjilik Riwut, kilometer 2.5 Palangka Raya, which had previously been closed by the Palangka Raya City Government due to expired permits to sell alcoholic beverages, violated operational permits during a surge in COVID-19 cases. Ironically, the club allowed underage Dayak girls to enter and consume alcohol."

After the open letter emerged, through the Head of Operational Affairs of Palangkaraya City Police Resort (Polresta Palangkaraya), the Chief of Police invited me to meet and discuss the issue, promising to take firm action against the entertainment venue that violated regulations.

This aligns with Noviandry's research (2022), which highlighted that in a step filled with empathy and deep concern, Marcus Rashford issued an open letter that touched hearts during challenging times, as a testament to his determination to fight for justice and alleviate child poverty in England. This open letter immediately sparked waves of support and sympathy from the broader community. Many were inspired by Rashford's courage and sincerity in speaking up for those less fortunate. An online petition garnered thousands of signatures, and calls to support Rashford's campaign became a focal point in major media outlets. This heartening public response eventually pressured the UK government to reconsider their policies. Following public pressure, the government took steps to extend the provision of free school meal vouchers throughout the summer holidays. It was a proud victory for Rashford and all involved in his cause. Open letters were also created to encourage specific actions (Howard et al., 2022).

The impact of open letters is also considered capable of mobilizing the masses and touching the hearts of policymakers to change their policies. Suryathini & Riesardhy's research (2024) examined "AESHNINA AZZAHRA'S OPEN LETTER TO PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP," where Nina endeavored to touch the hearts of world leaders through an open letter urging policy changes to stop the export of waste to Indonesia. The policy of exporting waste from the United States to Indonesia has caused issues for Indonesia, including health problems and environmental pollution. By addressing the President of the United States directly on the issue, Nina aimed to tackle environmental pollution in her homeland. Nina's action sparked media coverage both nationally and internationally.

In times when democracy does not function normally, speaking the truth, even when it is crystal clear, becomes no easy task. Especially considering many cases of criminalization and imprisonment of individuals under clearly fabricated charges, courage is required. Speaking the truth becomes a struggle for those who still aspire and ignite optimism to prevent our nation from plunging into deeper crises in the future (Nasih, 2021).

In research utilizing Harold D. Lasswell's communication model theory cited by Dedy Mulyana (2005), five elements are identified: communicator, communicatee, message, media, and effect. In this study, the communicator is the author of the open letter, namely the journalist. The journalist had engaged in social control reporting multiple times but received no response, prompting the creation of the open letter. The communicatee refers to the official addressed in the open letter, such as addressing the Chief of the National Police (Kapolri) to halt the case of alleged wrongful arrest of three residents of Tumbang Kalemei Village. The message conveyed comprises criticisms of officials or the intended objectives of the reporting. The media used includes official mass media, both print and online, published regularly according to their respective schedules. Lastly, the effect of the open letter presented here garnered positive responses from the officials targeted by the open letter, such as the issuance of a Decision to Terminate Investigation (SP3) in the case of the alleged wrongful arrest of the three residents of Tumbang Kalemei Village.

CONCLUSION

1. One of the strategies to achieve the goal of ensuring that the press functions effectively as social control is through Open Letters.
2. Journalists resort to Open Letters when their social control reporting is no longer responded to by officials or authorities.
3. In conducting social control reporting, journalists adhere to Law Number 40 of 1999 concerning the Press..

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Open letters as a product of the press are not widely recognized as an effective means of social control. Therefore, journalists are advised to use open letters as an alternative strategy to conduct social control.
2. Prior to composing an open letter, journalists should ensure that their reporting is accurate and based on facts in accordance with applicable regulations.
3. When creating social control news, journalists are advised to not limit themselves to a single report but to revisit the issue multiple times from various angles and sources.

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