

# Glancing at the Rearview Mirror, Focusing on the Road Ahead: Library and Information Professionals in Indonesia

by Liauw Toong Tjiek (Aditya Nugraha)

## Information Professionals in a Globalized World

Indonesia, like other Asian countries, didn't have a dominant written tradition as many of the Western nations did. Written records and documentation were largely created and kept by the ruling or intellectual branches of the society. Oral tradition dominated among the common people. Legends, history, knowledge, wisdom – all were passed on to the next generations through storytelling traditions. Dominant oral tradition is believed to be one of the major factors contributing to the low appreciation in Indonesian society of written records and documentation.

The tradition of (modern) libraries and librarianship was first introduced by the Dutch, who built libraries and started the librarianship profession in a repressive spirit. Libraries and the profession became a tool that the rulers used to preserve their power by controlling what was being published and read by the society. This environment is in contrast to the

Liauw Toong Tjiek (Aditya Nugraha) (anugraha@petra.ac.id) (anugraha\_a@yahoo.com) is the head of library of Petra Christian University (PCU), a private Christian university located in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia. His interests are in digital libraries, institutional repositories, digital collections, digital local content development, digital heritage and their roles in expanding the libraries' influence in the society. He also has keen interests in integrating information technology into library systems, products and services. His project, Desa Informasi (Information Village) – a digital institutional repository – was the topic of his first-place winning paper in the 2006 International Paper Contest held by ASIST-SIG/III. His current project is integrating digital signage technology into Desa Informasi to increase the visibility of its digital local content to the PCU campus communities as well as using digital signage technology for promoting library services and for corporate/campus communication.

egalitarian spirit that characterized the birth and development of libraries and librarianship in many Western countries, the United States in particular. The repressive spirit was reinforced in the New Order regime after our independence in the 1940s. Several different library-related professional organizations were encouraged to merge into a single nationwide professional organization called Indonesian Librarian Association (ILA). The move was widely perceived to be the New Order's political strategy to gain control over society's clusters of power. Since its first congress in 1977 (with one exception) the chairman of ILA has always been the head of the National Library of Indonesia (NLI), which is a branch of the central government. Some might argue that it is a strategy to empower the organization financially (NLI provides funding for ILA). However, the author believes that it is also a legacy of the repressive spirit of centralized Dutch rule, carried over through the New Order era.

The burden of history described above has contributed to society's lack of appreciation for the librarianship profession. This condition has been exacerbated by the fact that many librarians in Indonesia aren't really librarians, at least not in the sense that is commonly understood in Western countries. All who work at a library are called librarians. Only a small percentage of them have obtained formal degrees from library and information science (LIS) schools. Most are actually library assistants or clerical staff with some level of training in library technical and/or user services. The NLI has been conducting three-month to six-month equivalency trainings that transform these non-librarians into librarians. This practice is understandable from certain perspectives since there aren't enough library

schools in Indonesia to supply the demand for librarians. However these practices do not improve the credibility of the profession of librarianship.

There are approximately 22 higher education institutions that offer LIS education at various levels. Most offer only non-degree programs. Ten offer undergraduate programs, and two offer master's programs. Only one school offers a doctoral program. Careers in librarianship do not appeal to most Indonesians. It is difficult for LIS schools to attract and supply many bright students from/to the society. It is a vicious circle that has plagued librarianship in Indonesia. Although LIS schools, higher education libraries and professional organizations do hold seminars and/or workshops from time to time, there is currently no regular LIS conference in Indonesia. Lack of critical mass (librarians who conduct research or write/publish regularly) is believed to be the major obstacle in holding such events.

Society also perceives librarianship as merely dealing with administrative and/or clerical tasks. The public rarely have dealings with what many consider the very essence of librarianship, such as securing equal access for the society, protecting the freedom of information and empowering the civil society. The condition is worst in most government-run libraries. These libraries are notorious as places for castaways. In the context of government agencies, transferring staff to government-run libraries is a form of punishment.

### Collaboration and Networking

There are no formal interlibrary loan services in Indonesian libraries, primarily for three reasons. First, the big gap among existing libraries – in terms of policy, budget, collection, human resources and other factors – makes it difficult to collaborate. Institutions need to be at relatively the same level of performance in order to maintain sustainable cooperation. Most libraries still struggle to serve their local user communities. It is hard to expect them to collaborate to serve wider audiences. Second, postal service and transportation systems in Indonesia aren't reliable enough to facilitate collaboration efforts that rely on sending library materials across the country. Indonesia is an archipelagic country, consisting of more than 17,000 islands scattered across the equator. Third, while small-scale, informal interlibrary loan services and document delivery services have existed for

quite some time, relying on informal/personal networking among librarians, there is currently no agreed-upon system for interlibrary loan services among Indonesian libraries.

There have been a number of networking initiatives among libraries in Indonesia. The Association of Theological Schools in Indonesia was formed in 1963 and now has 36 members. The State University Libraries Communication Forum was formed in 1987, with 29 major state universities as members. Six of these universities are now working on a model for interlibrary loan/services among themselves. Indonesian Catholic University Library Network started its steady programs in 1996. It is part of the Association of Indonesian Catholic Higher Education with 16 Catholic universities as members. The Indonesian Christian Universities – Virtual Library was formed in 1997 with 19 member institutions. Indonesia Digital Library Network was established in 2000. The Indonesian Islamic Bibliographic Network was established in 2003 with current membership of 23 state Islamic higher education institutions. The development of these networks is encouraging, but their practices are specific to each network and do not provide options for other libraries to participate.

### Welcoming the Future

The development of democracy might bring a new hope for Indonesian librarianship. The centralized form of government is being transformed into a decentralized one where local governments gain more power and authority. While many local public libraries are suffering worse neglect as a result of this change, some are emerging as excellent examples of how public libraries could and should be run. Despite negative side effects due to the immature state of democracy in Indonesia, the change has also begun to empower local societies to be more involved in their own governance. Empowered civil societies will need access to information and other resources – activities in which the libraries and librarians can play major roles. It is up to the librarians and information professionals in Indonesia to assume these strategic roles and start the chain reactions that transform librarianship into a more respectable profession.

The past few years have witnessed the formation of several information/

library-related professional associations providing alternatives to ILA. This development reflects an increase in the ability of the profession to organize and build networks. These networks include the Indonesian Libraries Club (1982); the Indonesian Higher Education Libraries Forum (2005); the Media Librarian Forum (2005); the Association of Indonesian Library and Information Scholars (2006); the Association of Indonesian School Information Professionals (2006); Athenaeum Light Users Community (2006); and the Indonesian Library Development Foundation (2007). In addition, there are various other city/state-wide library networking initiatives.

The emergence of these numerous interest/profession-based associations, which mostly are free from any government intervention, is expected to stimulate more genuine ideas and activities in the profession, thus increasing the visibility of libraries and information professionals in the society. The author believes that the trend will help break the vicious circle that has limited Indonesian librarianship.

Recent policy developments have also added excitement in the librarians circle. The Indonesian government recently endorsed the Library Act, which has faced mixed reaction, but most agree that it is a sign of change in the profession. A Freedom of Information Act is being debated in the House of Representatives, with lots of pressure from various NGOs. The grant competitions held by the Directorate General of Higher Education have been giving incentives to higher education libraries to compete in innovation since 2006. Besides utilizing the grants to generate innovations, a significant portion of the grants has been used to build the Indonesian Higher Education Network (INHERENT).

INHERENT connects 32 major state universities as local nodes, where they serve as gateways for other Indonesian higher education institutions to link to INHERENT. The idea of building INHERENT came from the great cost of telecommunication infrastructure, which has hindered the growth of the Internet in Indonesia. Most schools and universities have little or no Internet bandwidth. INHERENT provides an alternative to the regular Internet bandwidth, giving each connected university fast access to the content provided by other connected universities via what is basically a private network. The network was established in 2007, connecting most major state

and private universities in Indonesia. However there isn't enough continuous content in the network. Libraries are the perfect candidates to fill in the need since they have rich content. The network has sparked new appreciation on the vital roles that libraries can assume.

The development of digital libraries and digital repositories also presents opportunities for libraries to broaden their influence in local and global society by developing digital local content. Libraries should start to identify resources that are considered to be local content – resources that are produced locally and/or have local characteristics – digitize them and provide them in their digital libraries/repositories. In the context of developing countries, digital local content resources can help bridge the digital divide (in terms of digital content contribution) between developed and developing countries. Digitizing local content resources also renews interest in and increases appreciation of local resources, which are usually considered to be inferior to digital resources produced by the West. Building such databases is an opportunity for libraries to assert their influence in local and global societies and encourage strategic international collaboration.

There are opportunities that ASIS&T can explore to increase collaboration with Indonesian librarians and information professionals. The U.S. State Department, through the U.S. embassy in Jakarta, has been active in providing funding for U.S. speakers to come and talk at various library events in Indonesia. A formal cooperation between the U.S. embassy, ASIS&T and one or more professional organizations in Indonesia would serve as a catalyst for sustainable future networking and collaborations. Indonesia will host the 2008 International Conference on Asian Digital Libraries (ICADL) in December 2008, in Bali. ASIS&T might want to consider establishing a point of presence at this event by opening a booth or distributing flyers. ASIS&T can also explore the possibilities for direct collaborations with the various professional organizations.

The field of library and information science is moving forward in Indonesia. The author is looking forward to welcoming a future of greater collaborations with colleagues around the world as Indonesia builds credibility at home and abroad. Readers are encouraged to review the references to learn more about library and information professionals in Indonesia. ■

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