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Demystifying Indonesia: Why Public Diplomacy Through Writings Matters ^[1]

In the past few weeks, there have been some articles published that show the lack of awareness of Indonesia on the international stage, particularly among policymakers and the intellectual community. *The Washington Post* recently published an article entitled “Pay attention to Indonesia. It will help determine the future of Asia.” Even though the article highlights Indonesia’s importance on the world stage, it shows how there is a lack of knowledge and awareness about Indonesia in the United States, particularly among policymakers in Washington, D.C.

The Canberra Times, in their articles in early February, has also highlighted that fewer Australians are studying Indonesian languages. Even now, less than one percent of Australian Capital Territory college students learn Bahasa Indonesia. This has made a concern, particularly for some Australian academics who study Indonesia.

In one of her famous books, *Indonesia, Etc.*, Elizabeth Pisani also mentioned that with its huge population and geographical area, Indonesia is one of the most invisible things on earth, given Indonesia is often unseen and unrecognized by the international community.

Indeed, criticism of the lack of awareness about Indonesia among the international intellectual community is not entirely new. In 2016, *The Lancet*, one of the world's authoritative academic journals in the field of medical science, published an article titled "Offline: Indonesia—unravelling the mystery of a nation." The article criticized how underperformed Indonesia is as the world's third most populated country in terms of its academic publication about Indonesia in the journal.

Interestingly, *The Lancet* made a comparison between the number of articles that it has on Indonesia with those on some other populated countries in the journal. For instance, there are 2,098 articles published about medical issues in India in their journal, followed by the United States with 1,287 articles and China with 851 articles. Surprisingly, Indonesia, the fourth largest country in the world, was left far behind with only 33 articles. Therefore, we should not be surprised if *The Lancet* calls Indonesia a nation of mysteries because there are a lot of things that haven't been discovered and written scientifically about Indonesia.

There are a lot of ways to promote Indonesia globally. Through international events such as the G20 last year and ASEAN chairmanship this year, they really promote Indonesia to the international community. However, one of the best ways to promote Indonesia's story globally is through public diplomacy, and one of the effective ways is through writings and publications about Indonesia.

Having more writings and publications on Indonesia for broader international audiences is, of course, important for Indonesia. It helps the international intellectual community to have a better understanding of Indonesia. In other words, it helps to demystify Indonesia for the global intellectual community.

That being said, to demystify Indonesia among the international intellectual community, there should be more public diplomacy engagement.

There are many things that can be written about Indonesia, as one of the world's largest countries in the world which is located at the center of the dynamic and increasingly significant Indo-Pacific region, Indonesia has become more and more important in the world's intellectual stages. Therefore, there is increasing demand from the international intellectual community that wants to know more about Indonesia.

In the scientific sphere, Indonesia's geographical location as the largest archipelagic state in the world with a huge maritime area provides very large opportunities for scientific discovery of marine biodiversity, marine environment and all other scientific research in relation to the ocean. With all its maritime zone, Indonesia seems to have the largest marine laboratory in the world and therefore has a huge potential to become the world's leading country for marine research.

In the social science sphere, such as economics, politics and international relations, Indonesia's experience has so many things to share. For instance, how Indonesia survives and rebuilt its economic resilience after a series of economic crises, how Indonesia has evolved as a democratic country after a long authoritarian rule and how Indonesia built its foreign relations as a non-aligned middle power remain important and interesting stories to be written about for the international community.

However, writings for a broader international audience seem to be not as easy for many Indonesians, including academics who should be trained in this. Much has been said about how the Indonesian education system does not train Indonesian students to think and analyze social problems and phenomena. This educational system has unconsciously shaped Indonesians' ability to think, read and write. For instance, in the Indonesian history class taught in high school, it is more important to remember when the Diponegoro War happened than to ask why the war happened and what we can learn from the event. Let alone the English barrier requires for many international publications.

Now, it seems that the Ministry of Education is aware of the lack of international publications on Indonesia and its importance for Indonesia's global reputation. As such, in the past few years, there has been some policy effort to increase the number of Scopus-indexed articles on Indonesia by Indonesian scholars.

Even though this policy is important in increasing Indonesian academic reputation, it is also important to write beyond just the academic community. Books, newspaper op-eds and blogs that will be read by the broader international community beyond academics are also important.

Currently, many of the articles, both academic or op-ed about Indonesia in international outlets, are published by foreign scholars or observers of Indonesia. In his chapter, Edward Aspinall found that only around 12% of social science research on Indonesia is written by an author based in Indonesia. This means that it is mostly foreign scholars who write international scholarship on Indonesia.

That being said, to demystify Indonesia among the international intellectual community, there should be more public diplomacy engagement. One way in enhancing effective public diplomacy is through publications and research on Indonesia in international outlets so that we can tell more stories about Indonesia to the broader international intellectual community. As Indonesian writer Pramoedya said "People can be clever as high as the sky, but if they don't write, they will be lost in society and history. Writing works for eternity."
