

## Diplomacy in Reporting: The Sulu Conflict in East Borneo

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### ABSTRACT

There is a continuous diplomatic cooperation between Malaysia and Philippines especially in relation to its involvement in a regional group called ASEAN. Nevertheless, there exist tensions and conflict with the emergence of a secessionist movement among the Philippines minority who insist on claiming territorial rights of Sabah. The February 2013 insurgency at Kampung Tanduo, Lahat Datu caused a conflict and triggered a bloody battle. Using in-depth interviews, document analysis and secondary data, this study explores the intensity in which journalists, Malaysian and Philippines were positioned in discovering the problems and challenged faced in gathering and reporting information as well as the decisions made during this time. It was found that the most critical aspect of decision making derives from professional ethics which govern the individuals. It is clear that the crime reporters' loyalties lie not just to the profession but also to the people who employ them. The study has also successfully provided information which could be a source of reference for media practitioners and academicians and gives understanding not just the decision making of the reporter but the function and ethical aspects of reporting in a sensational field like conflict and war zones. This study can serve as a model for evaluation when implementing policies and training and the findings can be used by advisory committees especially in addressing issues of journalists reporting on national security.

**Keywords:** *Conflict, peace, intrusion, interviews, diplomacy.*

### INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has been considered as a non-warring country (Faridah, 2008). Since 2002, the Malaysian audiences only source of news on war that reports on the Iraq-U.S. and Afghanistan-United States war. The Malaysian media have also identified war news as comprising events pertaining to military actions which includes issues of combat, armed invasion, military talks, supplies and provisions, armed deployment and the like and acts of terrorism (Faridah, 2008, p.96). During a period of her study, Faridah (2008) mentioned that Malaysia came out as an active country expressing views on "terrorism" and suggesting strategies to tackle "terrorism" without aggression. All this changed when Sabah, a state east of the peninsula was invaded by foreign militants.

#### *Public Diplomacy*

Most research on public diplomacy revolves around politics (Snow & Taylor, 2006; Rawnsley 2000), foreign policy (Manheim, 1994) and or terrorism (Pettersen, 2002). Some media and diplomacy research includes Nisbet, Nisbet and Scheufele (2004), Seib (2009) and Wetzstein (2010). According to Wetzstein (2010, p.507) since diplomacy has shifted from secret chambers to the public sphere, the press has turned into a major actor in diplomatic processes. According to Tong (2007), Chinese journalists are required to always place

political compliance above professional values and goals if they are to keep themselves and their organizations safe. However, it is said that to do so they must constantly conduct problem solving to overcome constraints and to achieve their goals.

A baseline definition of public diplomacy is to inform, engage, and influence foreign publics (Ross, 2003, p.22). Public diplomacy generally deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy (Taylor, 2006). This includes the interaction between private groups and interests between nations, communications and the process of intercultural communication. As much as public diplomacy is constantly discussed and used in terms of warfare and practical concerns of international relations, nevertheless, in journalism, other parts of news reporting such as crimes and crisis concerning foreign nationals also need to be focused on especially in this borderless world and where migration of nationals is fast becoming a sociocultural trend. Public diplomacy generally deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy (Taylor, 2006). This includes the interaction between private groups and interests between nations, communications and the process of intercultural communication.

Rajib and Taylor (2006) contend that public diplomacy is designed to build long term mutual understanding, benefiting both the source and the receivers. In a sense, public diplomacy differed from other forms of international propaganda because it is tailored according to the principle - 'to know us is to love us'. Hence, public diplomacy is used as a soft power approach, which we see in the form of journalism, to influence foreign policies and the publics. The two scholars also reiterate that public diplomacy has at least two sides – information initiatives which tend to advocate a certain point or view and cultural initiatives that seek to broaden mutual understanding.

Journalism comes in the form of words, visual and sound. According to the general semanticist (Hayakawa, 1979) words are the most sophisticated symbols of mankind, and derogatory words such as 'crusade', 'dictator', 'terrorist', 'prostitute' and the likes can exacerbate tension. On the other hand, words associated with glittering generalities which are propagandistic in nature such as 'honor', 'glory', 'love of one's country', 'loyal', 'patriotic' are positive and can generate goodwill and understanding among people of various nations.

According to Seib (2009), public diplomacy may be physically and culturally different from domestic audiences, they nevertheless deserve to be recipients of information that adheres to a high standard of truthfulness. This is indeed interesting as this paper tends to explore this feature where the victim is a foreign national and the suspect is a local highly dignified and in a top government ranking position. The lines are sometimes blurred when need to be truthful and objective come into play. Seib (2009, p.774), mentions that rarely does news coverage present all the information available about the topic being covered, but a basic precept of objective journalism is that the selection of information to deliver should not be guided by a political agenda. Could this be possible in this case? In any case for that matter, when the version of the truth serves the interest of a particular party and not all parties involved, then there is no public diplomacy. Basically, public diplomacy seeks to elicit popular support for solutions of mutual benefits and avoids threats, compulsion or intimidation (Smith, 1989).

### *Conflict and the Media*

The media play a dual role between governments and combatants or between communities in conflict. The media too acts as a gatekeeper with the power to determine what it reports and how it reports it. The news coverage of conflict including the reporting about war is grounded on the notion of conflict as a news value (Lee & Maslog, 2005). Conflict reporting is a branch of journalism practice which seeks to uncover important and crucial happenings and occurrences that cannot be ignored or undermined. Several scholars have their own interpretation and understanding of conflict reporting and this has been discussed in their work (Tuman, 2003; Nacos, 2002).

Studies of conflict by African media for instance provides evidence to support the claim that African conflicts are usually covered from a limited scope. It notes that the news media often disseminates a “stereotypical often sensational and narrow image of conflict” (Fair, 2000). It raised questions about the way ethnicity encourages a reporting of conflict that fundamentally dismisses local historical, political and economic specificities in favour of a view of conflict rooted in primordial sentiments of social difference (Amienyi, Onyebadi & Tahat, 2013, p.53).

Conflict reporting is about digging deeper on a particular issue or topic which is of public interest; it is a process rather than an event; it needs to be original and proactive; it must shed light on new information; it should be multi-sourced; and due to its in-depth nature, it calls for greater resources, teamwork and time than a routine news report. Conflict is generally more than a disagreement. It is an added to a perceived threat. The social configuration establishes a relationship amongst conflicting parties even if that relationship is very uneven and contested in content and form. The parties act accordingly to their perception of the situation. Power plays a crucial role and confrontation amongst conflicting parties each with some capacity to produce some effect in addressing the disagreement about needs, interests and consensus. The power here is closely linked to resource availability and legitimacy as well as to the potential of inflicting violence and the deployment of military means (as was the Sulu conflict). Once the conflict is manifest, the conditions for communicating, mobilizing and organizing them are critical to the process and the outcome (Anheier & Isar, 2007, p.20). Today’s phase of conflict is closely linked to the world views held by different populations, groups and individuals and how these world views line up with prevailing economic, political and cultural realities are pivotal.

Given the challenges differ according to political environments, culture and level of media infrastructure and independence, the first task is to identify the broad range of issues which require closer examination. Ethical issues such as the obligation to national interests versus the people’s right to know and the difficulty in navigating the many ethnic, social and religious barriers that divide Asian societies influence a country in conflict and the reporting of it. The press in Asia operates in media ecologies that are varied and in many nations (i.e. Malaysia), the media is seen as partners in the process of development – reportage has to keep in mind the international implications mainly foreign aid and investments. Conflict reporting in many Asian countries is still in infancy as is in Malaysia.

The nature of the Malaysian media has a profound effect on the nature of the information flows between these militants, government and society. Malaysia has a well and developed media network but also has some of the toughest censorship laws in the world. Government controls are evident both in the frequency with which government press releases and speeches are reported, the higher prominence that they accorded and

also in the restrictions which have been imposed on the opposition. These effects of these media controls are compounded by deficiencies in media practice. In particular, there is a lack of analyses when reporting on official statements about the extent of the terror network in South East Asia. The mainstream media seem content to accept at face value what the authorities or those claiming to be terrorism experts tell them when there is little evidence to back up those claims (Asia Times Online, 2002).

### *The 'Intrusion'*

On February 12, 2013, about 250 armed militants identifying themselves as members of the "Royal Sulu Force" of the defunct Sulu Sultanate in Southern Philippines encroached Malaysian soil through a coastal village in the town of Lahad Datu off the east coast of Sabah. The intrusion deemed an abysmal or rather suicidal attempt to assert a century-old claim on the sovereignty of the Malaysian state was a desperate bid by the then self-proclaimed and ailing Sulu Sultan, Jamalul Kiram (who died of illness just months after the conflict ended) who ordered his unregimented and loosely assembled band of militants mainly made up of ethnic Suluks to launch the offensive. In defense, Malaysia deployed its security forces.

In the early stages, Malaysian officials chose negotiations over an armed offensive with hopes of amicably averting the sinister plans of the intruders whom the local media had portrayed as "feeble and old men armed with rusty guns." However, on March 1, the two-week-long wait-and-see approach went horribly wrong when a deadly confrontation between the police and militants at the Tanduo Village, a hamlet set deep in the oil-palm plantation town sparked off a fiery battle that will record it in Malaysian history as the first armed intrusion since its independence from British colonisation. The militants fired the first round of bullets and two Malaysian police commandos were killed. A day later, a second attack killed six other policemen.

The dreaded events saw the police and the military, with its regular and elite Special Forces descend with its combat machinery on the once-tranquil town in a major offensive move codenamed "Operation Sovereignty". Over the next 30 days in battles that sporadically broke out in towns along the east end of the state, at least 90 militants were killed in the flush-out. Two dozen members of Malaysian security forces were wounded while 10 were slain, with at least four who died, not before a slow and barbaric death-by-mutilation the hands of the insurgents. The conflict garnered extensive news coverage being a critical period where both nations were gearing towards their respective general elections just weeks away.

## METHODOLOGY

The researchers used primarily in-depth interviews with four Malaysian journalists from various English newspapers and two Philippine journalists (many approached by the researchers were mum and decided not to engage in this research) as well as document analysis and secondary data which consist of previous studies and document analysis in conducting the methodology of this research. The sample although small was rigorous and descriptive in nature to give the research the added advantage of seeing and experiencing the conflict zone from the eyes of the informants. The present study seeks to explore ways in which journalists decided to cover this crisis situation and uncover the challenges faced by journalists reporting in a crisis location.

The first analysis was to consider and to explore the decision making factors the journalists perceived important in covering their stories and explore the strategies adopted to ensure fair, truthful and accurate coverage. This is also to understand the angles both sets of journalists were aiming to address. The third was to discover problems and solutions of information gathering and reporting and the extent of organizations, professional and structural undercurrents which may affect the investigation of stories.

The first step for the research was to understand and explore the historical background of the story and the angles in which the stories were written in identifying rhetoric and news angles. Second, the researchers used in-depth interviews via face to face and email to gather information. The selection of the journalists to be interviewed were based on a set of criteria which can include the fact that the journalists must have gathered, processed and written the stories for the period of time the conflict took place. The Malaysian journalists approached were more than willing to speak to the researcher while the Philippine journalists were not forthcoming in revealing information. All in all four Malaysian journalists who spent more than two weeks in Sabah were interviewed while two Philippines journalists were interviewed via email.

#### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

For the Malaysian media, the skirmish being the first typical conflict zone it had encountered domestically was a trial of sorts. Reporting was mainly material from official statements made in press conferences by the police and military. The Malaysian media with uncertainties on the pure facts of the historical background and implications had provoked the conflict, had discreetly steered clear of the political dispute on the right to the land in its news reports.

As such, news-hungry Malaysians swerved their attention to the Philippines media seeking a revelation to what they deemed the "vague part of east Malaysia history". The media of both countries took to their own sides in their views of the skirmishes, ignoring the stealthily buried history of the Sabah – South Philippines dispute. The biasness of the Philippines media was glaring when it justified the attack, defending Jamalul for his actions. Philippines officials who in media statements retorted with statements on the intrusion with comments such as 'this were something that was brewing', 'that it was foreseen' and 'it was imminent over the decade' had also stirred and stoked the inquisitiveness of news seekers of purportedly invalid rights to the sovereignty of Sabah.

The Voice of America (VOA) presented Presidential spokesman Edwin Lacierda as saying in a televised briefing that the Philippines is exhausting all options to bring peace. "We continue to feel strongly, one way to save lives is to lay down their arms. Our concern is a win-win solution for them as well as for us - for them to be able to preserve their lives," he said. Reports also quoted Philippine Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin as saying the Malaysian security forces hunting down the followers of the Sultanate of Sulu was a "low intensity conflict." Amirah Lidasan of the non-governmental group Suara Bangsamoro had told the *Philippine Inquirer* that the status of authenticity of the Sultanate of Sulu was unfinished business that "keeps on nagging us." The Philippine media had also highlighted the growing restlessness among Filipinos of Malaysia's purported heavy-handed handling of the Sabah conflict, despite having previously assured it would practice "maximum tolerance" while Manila continued talks with the Kiram clan. Unverified reports of Filipinos

living in Sabah were allegedly tortured and abused by Malaysian authorities was also discriminately highlighted by the Philippines media.

In terms of decisions made, in previous studies (Wilson, 2012) it was found that there were various factors which influence journalists in coverage of stories, 'investigative' in nature. This inadvertently summarizes the findings in exploring the important factors which are consistent especially in all reporters' decision making in the various news organisations. This is important in understanding and for future growth and training purposes. The reporters' only reported on facts which were presented to them by official sources or they scoured for bits and pieces of information from unquotable police sources. Informants also felt that bosses vis-a-vis editors were main players in decision making and ensured what stories are chosen, played up, played down, elaborated or followed up on for the days to come. Reporters were unable to avoid as they were met with deadline pressures and competition and the police were also unable to make a clear identification in most cases. But given time all newspapers and reporters' were able to clarify with accurate details.

There are common issues which can be highlighted in the findings above which proved to be of utter importance to the decision making process. This includes factors such as credibility, accurate and factual information, responsibility, consequence and confidentiality. Nevertheless, the researcher feels that the most critical aspect of decision making derives from a professional ethics which govern the individuals in the profession. It is clear that the crime reporters' loyalties lie not just to the profession but also to the people who employ them. In practice, journalists do not work in isolation. As Tanner et al. (2005, p.51) mentioned, they are a part of a large production of teams and subject to an editorial chain of command.

Decisions taken at an individual level are vetted and challenged daily as stories are passed from hand to hand. In this case the reporters were allowed a hand in deciding what was to be reported and how the stories were to be angled. With this in mind, the aspect of professionalism in the findings arises when reporters' revealed the importance of company policies, deadlines, laws and regulation and competition between newspapers. Therefore, within these aspects, professional ethics become an established rule of behaviour that it is no longer seen as something that is thought of but something that soon becomes innate. The reporters revealed that their decisions were also influenced by their personal conscience and personal principals and standards which includes their personal belief systems and through experiences garnered through years on the beat. The third category which the researcher felt was crucial in the decision making factor was through societal ethics which arose from the factors.

Here the reporters were also aware of what is needed in the community and what is acceptable by society. It was clearly revealed that the reporters were aware of their stand in society and what they should do and how they should behave in terms of relating to society and their social responsibility. This can be seen through their anxious display of information in creating awareness, educating and informing the public of the realities of life through the conflict. Problems and solutions of information gathering and reporting and the extent of organizations, professional and structural undercurrents which may affect the investigation of stories.

In terms of the challenges faced, according to a reporter (A) with five years of experience in the crime desk cum investigation beat said:

'..the challenges faced are obviously hearing and seeing ourselves the pain and agony of crime victims. The challenge we faced during the Lahad Datu intrusion was similar. Interviewing family members, colleagues of the fallen heroes were not easy. You can't help but to feel sad as well and it reflects on your writing, and to put it into words are not easy. Apart from that being in a conflict zone itself, the risk and danger, sleepless night, the stress, the competition.'

This was concurred by Malaysian journalist B with six years of experience stationed in East Borneo mentioning that reporters' movement was limited.

'We were monitored by the security forces as we were not allowed to enter certain areas. Some police info was not helpful as they refused to talk much about the operation. I was not allowed to enter the affected areas and some evacuation centers...where villagers who were also our sources stayed put as they were strictly guarded... journalists were not allowed...So we had to make contact with person in-charge of the centers.'

And yet reporter C added that,

'There were limitations that made things hard. Such as roadblocks by the police and armed force who did not allow us to enter the zone where the gun battles were taking place and sometimes one has to break the rules.'

Nevertheless, the informants did not foresee the challenges that the Malaysian armed forces would be facing and did not expect to be staying in the conflict zone for a long period of time. Accuracy in the collection of facts and the trend in the choice of sources and the exploration of differing standards in "everyday" news coverage and source attribution.

'Depends on what type of information is referred to here. Getting information depends on individual reporters. Some of us were based in the camp in Felda Sahabat and there were many security enforcement officers there who gave me the information I needed, apart from that we managed to speak to victims and witnesses of the intrusion.'

Reporter B added that she,

'...monitored Philippines media (online), built network and exchanged info with Philippines reporters who were in contact with sultan Jamalul's spokesperson. Since some Philippines journalists who came to Lahad Datu were denied entry (no work pass/media pass), I managed to exchange phone no with a Filipino reporter. I passed him Sabah police commissioner contact in exchange for Agbimuddin (who led the armed intruders in Tanduo) contact. He became a source in finding out what's

happening on their side (however contact ended after first skirmish on March 1).’

As for Philippine journalists, they are aware that it can be dangerous being in a conflict area especially if one is a woman. As a journalist E says:

‘..being a female reporter can be a disadvantage too especially in covering conflict in Muslim communities and I am aware of these limitations.’

It would seem that the biggest challenge for all the journalists Malaysian and Philippine was access and mobility in the conflict zone which cut off contact with sources and experience of seeing the area (Tanduo Village) for themselves. It is obvious that the area was cordoned off during the time of conflict as the armed forces were watchful of the militants and any or all civilians were disallowed to enter for security reasons (journalists were allowed to view the place with heavy military presence when the conflict was officially declared over).

The informants received constant information through press conferences and their sources on a regular basis. The government controlled media reports and this may not be accurate at the time of release but again according to journalist D, with 15 years of experience in the crime beat, there is always a need to refer to the official source. This is in line with what Oscar Gandy (1982) once said that in time of crisis, war journalists are dependent on information subsidies given by the highest authority in the government or the army. Only specific and strategic information is given out while others are downplays. In time of war and crisis and due to diplomatic reasons, it is not uncommon why sometimes officials do not release additional information for security and safety reasons. But it cannot be denied that spin doctors exist in the form of information providers. Along these lines the foreign media were fed second hand and periphery information and it was impossible to verify information cause of speculation.

Journalist E mentioned that she received information from the Philippine government, military and non-government organizations (NGO’s) but stressed that she would rather wait for solid information and if she cannot independently verify then she would quote reports of news outlets that is thought to be credible. When security forces warned Malaysian journalists not to enter certain areas (i.e. Kampung Tanduo) in terms of safety and security, the Malaysian journalists somehow felt that they needed to abide and to let the security forces do their job. While Philippine journalists had on several occasions tried to enter Tanduo (where armed intruders were held up) via road to get exclusive reports - (It was revealed that Philippine journalists said they have contacted from inside among the armed intruders). Some were detained, interrogated and released but returned following days to re-enter the village via sea but were immediately stopped by marine police.

All journalists, Malaysian and Philippines felt that there was no problem in gathering information which they got from police, villagers, and social media. Nevertheless, journalist C stressed that:



‘..verifying information with the higher authorities such as the Sabah police commissioner could be difficult especially when need to update online (on the go) with verified facts. Phones were unanswered, sometimes a very late reply. So sometimes we had to make do with what we had.’

Journalist E mentioned that the goal is to talk to as many people close to the conflict as possible and verify information from the country capital with officers or politicians on the ground. She also added that the conflict is too common in southern Philippines especially in Sulu and she acknowledges that there are ‘great reporters who are able to show the root of the conflict, his wars, and the impact of the communities. She also stressed that she has had prior training in covering conflict situations as she had attended some seminars and have got much assistance from editors who are considered experts on conflict reporting.

‘Information from the military should be attributed to the military and provide the context. If the information is limited, we should at the very least explain where the information is coming from and what possible agenda could the source of information we have. This allows the readers to decide for themselves if the information is credible.’

The most important aspect of the whole exercise was the fact that the Malaysian journalists did not have any formal training in conflict reporting and neither did their editors which made it unusual to report on what was going on compared to their Philippines counterparts. This is confirmed in an earlier interview with one of the editor-in-chief of a Malaysian leading national daily: “our journalists are not combat trained and this makes it difficult for us to cover in war zones. Often times, we have to depend on the war correspondents from the global media” (Faridah, 2008). In contrast, the Philippines’ journalists were familiar with conflict zones referring to the Sabah siege from Tawi-Tawi, Basilan and Zamboangan City by the MNLF. Hence most of the Malaysian journalists who were present at the conflict zone were either crime reporters who at some point were open to conflict situations and or situations of terror, grief and spontaneity or general reporters who lack the background operational knowledge of gathering and reporting news of conflict. As journalist B states:

‘I think there should be special training for journalists on this matter. The way I see it, the conflicts was definitely something new and some journalists were not aggressive and were following the order of the security forces as the media were being monitored and were told of the do’s and don’ts by security forces.’

Nevertheless, only one Malaysian journalist, D had some amount of training by attending seminars and talks on conflict and used the knowledge he garnered to help in his preparation of being in a conflict zone.

The findings also revealed that factors such as competition, deadlines and company policies and the laws and regulation play a role in ensuring the type of decisions made by the journalists especially in a country like Malaysia which has an extensive array of laws such

as the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) and the Official Secrets Act (OSA) amongst others and the journalists are highly aware of this and what can and cannot be reported.

#### IMPLICATIONS

From the contributions to knowledge, the study successfully provides information which could be a source of reference for media practitioners and academicians. Apart from this, the study also provides an understanding not just the decision making of the reporter but the function and ethical aspects of reporting in a sensational field like conflict and war zones. This study can serve as a model for evaluation when implementing policies and training and the findings can be used by advisory committees especially in addressing issues of journalists reporting on national security.

The mass media, especially the traditional mass media has always been credible and deemed as a trusted medium of information. Then, the mass media have a role and a huge responsibility in delivering transparent information to the public. The media also plays a role in the delivery of policies made by the government to the people (Anom, Kee and Zawawi, 2014). Therefore, journalists should be careful about context especially when a story is sensitive. Advisory committee members could use examples from this study as those of best practices for training of staff in the news beat and to be able to identify ethical acts in a professional capacity in the organization. The study further reveals the need for professional development of reporters and editors. By learning the practice of reporters in this study linked to the conflict and war, editors can use these as examples for their own practice and decision making. Specific orientation in the workplace should be implemented such as the existence of reporting on peace and approaches of unbiased and unfiltered information flow.

Peace permeates language, behaviors and interactions, and excludes violent language, abusive behaviors, and unjust treatment. In a peaceful society, everyone benefits from solidarity and collaboration (Faridah, 2017). Peace journalism has been described as a broader, fairer and more accurate way of framing stories, drawing on the insights of conflict analysis and transformation (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005). The definition is based on a premise that place great importance to the understanding of conflicts and violence of journalists since their reports may contribute to the momentum towards war or peace. Peace journalism is indeed a path towards soft power diplomacy. Through the language of peace journalists, the essence of public diplomacy will materialize which is ideally communicating with the people, particularly foreigners, to affect their thinking in ways that are beneficial to us and to them. The goal is to influence the behavior of the foreign government by influencing the attitude of its citizens. The Lahad Datu incident is the case in point. Aggressive measures need to be taken to pro-actively ensure reporters, are able to implement in their everyday work. Workshops and training sessions need to be implemented to ensure reporters are prepared for any arising conflicts or wars for that matter.

The government needs to take some amount of calculating risks to allow journalist into certain conflict zones. It is unfortunate that the powers that be are not at a level where they would understand the task and job of a journalist as to how far they can go to report a story. Seeing as the nation is a cautious one - that does not take risks and does not allow her people to do so either, asking the government (Malaysian) to take such a leap of faith is

a huge risk none the less but the fact of the matter is war zone or conflict reporting in Malaysia could possibly be a lost cause.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, what this paper aimed to do is evaluate the coverage of conflict, problems and challenges faced by journalists and can expand to become common practice by pinpointing the limitations and opportunities for the future. The paper also focused on how investigative journalism training and practice can be developed to provide in-depth news reporting of a crisis and or conflict situation. As a result, this project sought to provide a set of recommendations to outline the way forward in conflict reporting and reporting terrorism in order for such a practice to play a considerable role in South East Asia especially the fact that Malaysia journalists live and report in a country with strict media laws and regulation. It also forms a basis for journalists to discover the impact of conflict journalism as a base for a knowledge based form of journalism. The concept of how conflict can be reiterated from a peace perspective is lacking and should be recommended for future training of all reporters - not just in Malaysia.

Editors and journalists should be proactive in presenting various dimensions of the conflict and should be purveyors of peace reporting especially when the world is bullishly going forth in the direction of reporting on issues of ethnic strife, terrorism and insurgencies. They should be trained on the appropriate use and misuse of media language and as peace communicators they should also be sensitized on the soft and hard power of public diplomacy especially when covering news in times of war and peace involving foreign nations. The Malaysian and Philippine governments and media must handle this conflict with extreme caution to balance its relations with each other while giving the interest and safety of the 200 Filipino-Muslims hold up in Sabah the attention they deserve. An enmity with a neighbor in South East Asia is hardly welcome at this time when the Philippines are embroiled in a lopsided conflict with a giant neighbor over the West Philippine Sea and when Malaysia itself is going through a turbulent political storm.

#### BIODATA

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