Exceeding the gaze of the scholar

Those who are familiar with the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata,* will be familiar with the episode in which the semi-divine warrior-prince Arjuna, on the eve of the fateful battle between the Pandawas and their cousins the Korawas, beseeches the God Krishna to explain how and why the battle between the two sides is necessary. Arjuna cannot reconcile his duty as a prince and his duty as a soldier, and is thus torn between two seemingly contradictory ends: to protect life and to destroy life. Krishna, on the other hand, warns Arjuna that he cannot hope to understand all, for his own mortal mind and faculties are finite, and that such an understanding would require the capacity to encompass the infinite. When Krishna finally relents to Arjuna's plea, he reveals himself – and the universe – in all its complexity; this image of the infinite is so great in scope and magnitude that Arjuna is forced to beg Krishna to resume his mortal form. The lesson is plain enough for all to see: our knowledge of the world is necessarily limited, subjective and piecemeal so that we can comprehend some of it.

Farish A Noor

All knowledge is partial
The lesson is also instructive for those of us who inhabit the field of academia, and as every scholar knows no academic endeavour can ever hope to be exhaustive in its breadth and scope, and no work can ever represent the subject of research in its totality. This is the problem of full presence, as it has been articulated by successive generations of philosophers, and points to the obvious fact that nothing, *nothing,* can ever be fully reconstituted in its entirety for the sake of academic examination, no matter how sincere and comprehensive that effort may be. It is a caveat that ought to be attached to every sample of academic writing: 'This work cannot and should not be taken as final, closed and exhaustive.'

In my other avatar as a full-time academic, such caveats have been brought into play in my drier academic writing. While working on two massive religio-social movements, namely the Tablighi Jama'at and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS,[1] I was able to add further qualifications to the observations I forwarded in my books, namely that my research was necessarily partial, limited and shaped by the contingencies of the here-and-now. But no such provisions are available to me when I find myself in the unfamiliar terrain of media work.

I am currently in the process of working on a documentary project about Indonesia in the lead-up to the elections of this year, and it is proving to be a herculean task indeed. Despite the fact that the documentary series will include six episodes, there is simply not enough time to devote to the myriad of topics that make Indonesia the complex and hugely fascinating country that it is. Here one is confronted by a thorny question that is on the one hand practical and on the other hand philosophical: How does one ever capture the complexity of a composite entity such as a nation-state, and can such a project ever truly succeed?

Academics and the media
Academics such as myself have a long acquaintanceship with the media, and the fact that I have a weekly op-ed column in several newspapers already testifies to the fact that I do not underestimate the power of media in general. However, the dilemmas faced by the academic when working in and with the media are manifold. For a start, the usual degree of control that an academic has when presenting his work via lectures and tutorials is severely compromised by the practical limitations of the media – be it in terms of time or column inches. The academic is used to working

Above:
Farish A Noor.
Right: Film crew
Farish A Noor in
Cambodia.

Both photos from
author's private
collection.

in an environment where claims need to be proven and substantiated, often via cross-referencing, triangulation and the power of footnotes, endnotes and appendices. The luxury of the academic book is that despite the obvious limitation of pages, there are at least pages – in the plural. Whereas in the case of a regular op-ed, the word limit of a thousand words renders impossible the fall-back position of citations, references and extensive quotations to back up a point.

These limitations are compounded in the case of visual media, where the relationship between the producer, cameraman and the academic is a complex one. On the one hand there is the need to capture not only ideas, but to translate them into visuals that are arresting and interesting for the viewer. The academic on the other hand is less concerned with spectacular images and more concerned with the need to get as much data crammed into the short space of 23 minutes (which is the average for any half an hour documentary, with advertising breaks thrown in). It is not an easy task, I have discovered, to reconcile these very different needs and agendas in a common project.

Imagine then the difficulties I now face while trying to do justice to a topic as vast as Indonesia today. How to bring to the fore the manifold narratives of two hundred and forty million

The challenge of encompassing Indonesia

lives that encompass the nation-state of Indonesia. There lies the epistemic challenge when working on a project such as this one, for the fundamental question is – how do we speak of 'Indonesia'? The tendency of scholars and the media alike is to speak of nation-states in the singular, thereby giving the impression of a flat, two-dimensional national space that is called the nation; and by doing so reinforcing the view that nations are fundamentally homogenous and with clearly defined boundaries (both political and geographical). That this is erroneous is old hat by now, for it has been debunked time and again by scholars like Benedict Anderson who have presented nations as imagined communities where individual subjectivities tend to overlap thanks to shared interests or the understanding of common national symbols; but this does not imply the existence of a unitary nation. Even if we accept that all nations are complex – and Indonesia is certainly no exception to the rule – how do we capture this complexity in media form?

The challenge is akin to capturing movement in a photograph, which is literally impossible for all photographic images are necessarily static. But a photograph (or rather the photographer) can capture the *impression* of movement at least, and when this is done successfully some epistemic claims can be made. One can look at such a photo and say "I can see that there is movement in the (still) image". In trying to capture the diversity and complexity of Indonesia I cannot hope to capture it in its entirety, in some raw form that exceeds media/visual arrest. Invariably, so much will be left out thanks to the editing process, and much of what will eventually end up on the screen will be selected. One cannot hope to ever present Indonesia – or any country – in its entirety, be it in the media or in academic scholarship, but one can at least try to allude to that complexity that escapes the camera lens and the TV screen.

Indonesia documented

That Indonesia's complexity needs to be appreciated and acknowledged now is greater than ever, for the country has undergone so many changes that it would be wrong for us to assume that the Indonesia of 2014 is the same country that it was in the 1980s or 1990s. Decentralisation and demands for autonomy have created pockets of local power all over that vast archipelago, to the point where we may soon be able to speak not of a singular Indonesia, but of several 'Indonesias'. The youth boom, the demographic changes, massive rates of urbanisation, and the emergence of a new educated urban middle class, have all contributed to a plethora of new subject positions that did not exist two decades ago; and in the process fuelled demands by hitherto-silent and marginalised groups for recognition and presence on the national stage.

The singular voice of Indonesia – if there ever was one, which I doubt – has given way to a cacophony of new narratives and demands, and each of these will demand its share of air-time and column inches too. In short, if the project I am working on now seems a daunting task, it is only because Indonesia has become a daunting nation,

including for Indonesians themselves. In the midst of this complexity, however, there is still the need for us to understand – no matter how fragmentary that understanding may be – the complexity of that vast and great nation-state known as Indonesia.

To this end, several narrative/media devices and strategies were incorporated in the Indonesia documentary series in order to cover as many bases as possible, and to foreclose the possibility of criticism. The first hurdle to be overcome was the very title of the series itself (which is still being discussed by myself and the team of producers). From the outset, it was decided that the title has to convey the impression of Indonesia's complexity and pluralism, without falling into the trap of reductionism or over-simplification. Titles such as 'Inside Indonesia' were rejected for they suggest some privileged 'inner knowledge' of the country, which in turn gives the mistaken impression that the host has some form of privileged access that the viewers and interviewees do not. Likewise we wished to convey the notion of a complex country that was still understandable if one were to adopt an open-minded and nuanced perspective on the subject. Sensational sub-titles like 'the war on terror' were likewise rejected, as we wanted to go beyond the conventional headlines, stereotypes and tropes through which Indonesia has been viewed thus far.

The scope of the documentary series was also meant to be far-reaching, looking at as many places in Indonesia as possible within the limited confines of a modest budget and obvious time-constraints of the host who is, after all, a full-time academic with other academic responsibilities as well. Yet despite the gruelling schedule that the entire team was forced to work by, we did manage to address issues in places as diverse as Aceh, Jakarta, Surakarta, Jogjakarta, Bali, Makassar and Poso, covering at least three major island groups: Sumatra, Java/Bali and Sulawesi. Our dream of doing an episode in West Papua, however, did not materialise due to restrictions on travel and filming in that province.

The focus of the series was on issues and personalities, and one episode was dedicated to the question of autonomy in post-*reformasi* Indonesia, an episode on youth aspirations, an episode on upward social-economic mobility (and immobility for some), on religion, on culture and on the new paths to power. In this respect at least I was particularly happy to be able to include a wide range of personalities from all walks of life and social class backgrounds. The interviewees included a princess from the royal family of Surakarta Hadiningrat who was running for a Parliamentary seat, a member of the Indonesian Porche owners club, a prominent social commentator and novelist, a range of activists and also ordinary Indonesian *beca* (rickshaw)-pullers, workers and students, each of whom offered a very different glimpse into the socio-economic and political realities of Indonesia today.

Millions of voices

Finally, it was decided that for a series like this the final word should be given to the people of Indonesia themselves, and the final sequence of the final episode features an extended

The singular voice of Indonesia – if there ever was one, which I doubt – has given way to a cacophony of new narratives and demands.

'talking heads' gallery of profiles, where each interviewee is asked the same question: What do you hope to see for the future of Indonesia? The result is an extended catalogue of hopes and aspirations, articulated by Indonesians themselves, about what they wish to see in the future of their country. This was a point that I was keen to emphasise from the beginning of the project, namely that no documentary about Indonesia would be complete unless we gave the final say to the subjects of the documentary themselves. If the idea of there being not a single Indonesia, but rather millions of 'Indonesias' is to be conveyed at all, then I felt that the best way to do so would be by allowing Indonesians to speak of their hopes and concerns about their own country, and in the process of doing so communicate the impression of the many life-worlds that exist in Indonesia at present, and by showing how this contested nation is still being debated, discussed and dissected by the citizens themselves – proof, if any was still needed, of the dynamic and evolving nature of contemporary Indonesian society and politics. Here the academic host was deliberately pulling himself into the background, in order to open up a new space where the contested imaginaries of Indonesia can instead come to the fore.

As the academic host for the series, I felt that it was vital for me to make my own intervention/s in the documentary process and to ensure that the final outcome would be a documentary series that at least alludes to the complexity of the subject at hand. I confess to harbouring deep-rooted concerns about the power of the media, and the worry that I may not have done justice to a subject as vast as Indonesia today. For there is always the attendant fear that a finished work – academic or mediatic – will leave the subject entirely objectified in the most simplistic manner, and that the final product will seem to the reader or viewer as something that is whole, complete, exhausted. In the light of recent developments in academia and academic writing – ranging from the deconstructive and plural histories of the likes of Simon Schama and the criticisms of post-structuralist thought – such an easy conclusion would be derided as a case of over-simplistic reductionism or lazy encapsulation, and would not be accepted by any serious scholar today.

The anxiety of the scholar who has to work via the medium of the media is thus doubly compounded, as it is in my case. There is not merely the desperate need to be able to make *epistemic* claims, but I confess to harbouring the need to do *justice* to the subject as well, to convey the complexity of the subject correctly – *epistemically and ethically* – to the best of my abilities, and to the extent that the media format accommodates and allows.

Compounding matters for academics such as myself who have chosen to also work with and in the media is the tendency of the academic institution – itself a closed hermetic circle with its own particular rites and rituals of mutuality and association – to view the media askance, and to regard liminal entities such as media-friendly academics as an anomaly. The tag-line often pinned upon such individuals is to refer to them as 'pop-star academics' (one of the less derogatory terms, I might add) and their work as 'pop academia'. Such labels are of course superfluous, but they are not entirely meaningless, for from a Wittgensteinian point of view their meaning lies in the manner in which they point to the gulf (of perspective, norms, modalities) between the academic and media worlds, and they give the mistaken impression of their being an unbridgeable gap (or worse still, a hierarchy) between the two. In my defence of the media I would simply note the obvious power of the image and how in some instances images – understood here as signs/signifiers – can communicate meanings with an economy and effectiveness that words often fail to do. It is one thing to cite statistics of poverty and wage differentials, it is quite something else to show an image of a poor beggar forced to eat mouldy bread from a dustbin. The former satisfies our need for empirical data, but the latter touches upon a raw human nerve and makes such inequalities tangible for us, opening the path to empathy, and consequently – one hopes – understanding and knowledge as well.

Farish A Noor is Associate Professor at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University NTU Singapore, where he is also head of the Contemporary Religious Politics in Southeast Asia Programme. He is currently working on a 6-episode documentary series on contemporary Indonesia with Channel News Asia (CNA) and has completed two other series with the same channel: My Southeast Asia (CNA, 2012) and Across Borders (CNA, 2013) (isbhahmad@ntu.edu.sg)

Reference

1 Farish A. Noor. 2012. *Islam on the Move. The Tablighi Jama'at in Southeast Asia,* Amsterdam University Press; Farish A. Noor. 2014. *The Malaysian Islamic Party 1951-2013. Islamism in a Mottled Nation,* Amsterdam University Press.