Experts pin copycat crimes on media

Astrid Wijaya, The Jakarta Post, Jakarta | Fri, 11/14/2008 11:14 AM | National

The debate rages over whether excessive media coverage encourages crime, with one woman admitting she was emulating the endeavors of a heavily documented serial killer when she killed and mutilated her husband recently.

Experts of the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) and the Indonesian Institute on Governance discussed Thursday the consequences of unrestrained media coverage during a seminar titled "Perspectives on Freedom of Expression in Asia and Europe" as a follow up to the 9th Asia-Europe Seminar on Human Rights last year in Cambodia.

Mutilation cases have increased since Ryan "The Butcher"'s bizarre recent spate of killings received unprecedented media attention, sparking allegations the media has produced copy-cat killers.

Singaporean expert on journalism and media Cherian George backs the theory. Speaking at seminar, he warned the public of the media's dark side.

"It is true the media could produce copy cats, and not just limited to criminal cases. The editors must realize this before constantly publicizing the news," George said.

Another speaker, Kevin Boyle, a law professor at the University of Essex, said extended coverage of crimes was not recommended.

He called on the media industry to preserve professionalism and take into account social and moral values and to respect individuals' rights.

Boyle said "blackmailing reporters" was another challenge facing freedom of the press.

"There is a popular and official concern about the abuse of information and communications technologies, such as child pornography, incitement of hatred, violence and terrorism and fraud," Boyle said.

Boyle and George were in Indonesia as part of their Asian tour, which took them to six countries from Sept. 6 to 14.

Both said that in a democracy, freedom of expression was mandatory, but that in reality the right was compromised by certain parties, including by government intervention in media affairs.

"Freedom of expression and freedom of the press continue to be violated in the forms of censorship and attacks on media workers and human rights' defenders, also by excessive concentrations of media ownership both in Europe and Asia, at the expense of media diversity," Boyle said.
George said many journalists had been killed and imprisoned.

"The media acts as a barometer in a democratic country. Journalists require special attention. As long as they don't have special rights to protect them, attacks on media workers will still be committed," George said.

Incidences of abuses against the media were prevalent during the New Order era under former president Soeharto.

However, the reform era has seen a number of journalists and editors of media outlets jailed for reports government officials and businessmen deemed slanderous.

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