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**RACHMI KURNIA SIREGAR,
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research paper entitled**

**CULTURAL JOURNALISM AS SOCIAL WATCHDOG: A STUDY OF
“RUBRIK SANG PAMOMONG” (1996-1998) IN “SUARA
MERDEKA” NEWSPAPER, INDONESIA**

in

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
ICMAR
MULTIDISCIPLINARY ACTION RESEARCH

held on 11th – 12th June 2026 at Kolej Poly-Tech MARA Kuantan



MOHD ZAKI BIN IBRAHIM

DIRECTOR

KOLEJ POLY-TECH MARA KUANTAN

in collaboration with

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CULTURAL JOURNALISM as SOCIAL
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Director's Foreword

Alhamdulillah, praise be to Allah SWT. By His grace, we gather today at the International Conference on Multidisciplinary Action Research (ICMAR 2026). On behalf of Kolej Poly-Tech MARA Kuantan, I extend our warmest welcome to everyone. Our focus is “Multidisciplinary Innovation and Action Research for Sustainable and Future-Ready Societies,” where action research transforms challenges into practical solutions and connects researchers across fields from AI and digital transformation to social sciences and sports performance. In 2024, KPTM Kuantan began its Action Research journey through a UMPSA grant led by Associate Professor Ts. Dr. Aishah binti Abu Bakar, now our external advisor. Following a mini colloquium, ICMAR 2026 marks our first international conference, co-organized with University of Nizwa, Oman, UMPSA, and USIM. Anchored by its theme, the hybrid conference features seven sub-themes including AI, sustainability, communication, business, engineering, and sports, supporting the KPTM Next Level of Excellence (NLE 30) blueprint.

We welcome all presenters from 27 institutions, with 22 physical sessions, 31 virtual sessions, and over 100 participants, uniting universities, colleges, and international partners. Special thanks to our external advisor and keynote speakers Associate Professor Ts. Dr. Muhamad bin Haji Mat Noor, Associate Professor Dr. Fariza Puteh Behak, and Datuk Shalin binti Zulkifli. Thank you very much.

Mohd Zaki bin Ibrahim
Director, KPTM Kuantan



Deputy Academic Director's Foreword

Alhamdulillah, our utmost gratitude to Allah SWT. By His grace, we welcome you to the International Conference on Multidisciplinary Action Research (ICMAR 2026) organized by Kolej Poly-Tech MARA Kuantan. This conference is more than an academic event—it is a meaningful platform that empowers lecturers to transform classroom challenges into impactful research, strengthen scholarly practice, and contribute to real-world solutions through action research. Centered on the theme “Multidisciplinary Innovation and Action Research for Sustainable and Future-Ready Societies,” ICMAR 2026 provides a platform for sharing action-based insights through a hybrid format: Day 1 physical for KPTM staff and Day 2 online for all participants. The conference also features seven sub-themes including AI, sustainability, communication, business, engineering, and sports. ICMAR 2026 received a total of 53 paper submissions from local and international institutions.

This milestone would not be possible without the dedication of all committee members, presenters, committed participants, rigorous reviewers, and esteemed jury members whose expertise ensures the quality, integrity, and impact of every contribution. Thank you very much. Wassalamu'alaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh.

Nor Faradilla binti Mohamed Idris
Deputy Academic Director, KPTM Kuantan



The top corners of the page feature decorative geometric patterns. The top-left corner has a cluster of blue and yellow hexagons. The top-right corner has a blue and yellow grid-like structure with squares and rectangles.

Preface

The ICMAR 2026 proceedings showcase a collection of multidisciplinary research presented at the International Conference on Multidisciplinary Action Research (ICMAR 2026), held on 11–12 June 2026. This volume brings together research papers contributed by academics, practitioners, and researchers from various institutions, both local and international. Each paper has undergone a rigorous review process to ensure quality, relevance, and academic integrity, supported by dedicated reviewers and jury members. The proceedings aim to document and disseminate practical insights that bridge theory and practice, in line with the conference theme, “Multidisciplinary Innovation and Action Research for Sustainable and Future-Ready Societies.” It is our hope that this publication serves as a valuable reference for educators, researchers, and professionals, inspiring continued engagement in action research and fostering meaningful contributions toward sustainable development and future-ready education systems.

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**Cultural Journalism as Social Watchdog: A Study of “Rubrik Sang Pamomong”
(1996-1998) in “Suara Merdeka” Newspaper, Indonesia**

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Keywords:

Cultural journalism, Social watchdog, *Hasta Brata*, Rubrik “Sang Pamomong”, Javanese culture

ABSTRACT

This study examines the construction of *Hasta Brata* leadership values in the Rubrik Sang Pamomong (RSP) published by the Suara Merdeka newspaper from 1996 to 1998. Employing a constructivist paradigm and a qualitative case study approach, the research draws on data collected through the observation of eight RSP articles, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The Social Responsibility Theory of the Press is used to explore how the media performs its social and moral functions through journalistic practices rooted in local cultural traditions. The findings reveal a gap between the ideal leadership values embodied in the *Hasta Brata* philosophy and the leadership practices that prevailed during the presidency of Soeharto. The RSP served not merely as a source of cultural knowledge but also as a space for public reflection that conveyed moral messages and social criticism regarding contemporary leadership realities. Such criticism was articulated subtly through *pasemon*, a form of symbolic communication characteristic of the high-context communication tradition in Javanese culture. Through this communicative strategy, the RSP expressed ethical concerns and critical reflections while remaining within prevailing cultural norms. The study demonstrates that the RSP functioned as a moral guardian, a space for social representation, a form of social oversight, and a medium for preserving local wisdom amid political and social change.

INTRODUCTION

The press not only functions as a channel for disseminating information to the public, but also as a social institution that contributes to the development and dissemination of values, norms, and ethical orientations in society (McQuail, 2010; Schudson, 2003). Through journalistic practices, the media shape public understanding of social reality by selecting issues, framing events, and presenting particular perspectives (Carey, 2009). In this regard, journalistic columns provide an important space for reflection, interpretation, and evaluation of social issues while also offering ethical guidance to readers (Soysal, 2025). Through the selection, interpretation, and representation of social reality, journalism participates in the construction of meaning in society (Anderson, 2020). In this sense, journalism functions as a cultural practice through which society negotiates shared values, identities, and ethical standards.

The relationship between journalism and the formation of cultural meaning becomes particularly significant in societies where traditional values remain influential in shaping public life. In Indonesia, a notable example can be found in the *Rubrik Sang Pamomong (RSP)*, a cultural column published by the *Suara Merdeka* newspaper since November 21, 1996. Rather than serving as a conventional opinion column, RSP serves as a reflective space where social issues are interpreted through the lens of Javanese cultural wisdom. Through stories, metaphors, symbolic narratives, and ethical reflections, the column offers readers a framework for understanding social realities while preserving local cultural values.

Among the recurring themes in RSP, leadership emerges as one of the most prominent. The column frequently references the concept of *Hasta Brata*, a classical Javanese leadership philosophy that draws ethical guidance from the eight elements of nature. Traditionally, *Hasta Brata* represents an ideal model of leadership characterized by wisdom, justice, compassion, responsibility, patience, and devotion to the community (Bratawijaya, 1997). The research results of Selvarajah & Meyer (2017) show that the values of *Hasta Brata* remain relevant in contemporary discussions about ethical leadership, which increasingly emphasize social responsibility, moral legitimacy, and public accountability as important dimensions of effective leadership.

In RSP, leadership is constructed not merely as a technical or administrative matter, but as a social practice grounded in ethical and moral principles. This meaning is articulated through critical reflection, social evaluation, and cultural symbols that resonate with the reader's lived experiences. This approach was particularly significant during Indonesia's transition from the end of the New Order period to the beginning of the Reformation Era (1996–1998), when press freedom was still limited and criticism of political authority was often conveyed indirectly through metaphors and cultural references (Imron et al., 2016; Suwirta, 2018).

In this regard, *Hasta Brata* is a form of indigenous leadership knowledge. Similar to other indigenous leadership traditions, it derives its legitimacy from cultural memory, inherited wisdom, and ethical principles transmitted across generations. Kelly & Nicholson (2021) describe indigenous leadership as a form of ancestral leadership in which leadership knowledge emerges from the interaction between people, place, and intergenerational wisdom. Leadership, from this perspective, is not merely an individual attribute but a relational and ethical practice sustained through cultural continuity and collective responsibility.

The Indonesian context further supports the importance of culture in shaping understandings of leadership. Research by Sahertian & Jawas (2021) shows that cultural values play a crucial role in defining leadership excellence among indigenous and non-indigenous leaders in Indonesia. Their findings suggest that effective leadership cannot be fully understood apart from the cultural environment in which leadership practices are embedded. Therefore, examining *Hasta Brata* as a culturally rooted leadership framework contributes not only to Indonesian scholarship but also to broader international discussions on indigenous leadership and culturally informed approaches to leadership ethics. However, cultural leadership values are not only inherited through social practices and traditions but are also represented and reinterpreted through various forms of public communication, including the mass media. In this context, journalism serves as a space for the production of meaning that can reconstruct, disseminate, and negotiate cultural values with the public.

Furthermore, recent journalism research increasingly explores journalism as a site for the construction of meaning, emphasizing the role of journalistic narratives in shaping public interpretations of social reality (Anderson, 2020). However, there has been limited scholarly attention to how cultural journalism constructs and communicates indigenous leadership values within specific historical contexts. Specifically, no research has systematically investigated how the RSP used Javanese cultural narratives to articulate leadership ethics during Indonesia's transition from the late New Order period to the early Reform era.

This absence represents a significant research gap. While previous research has examined Javanese leadership philosophy or the political role of the Indonesian press, little is known about how meanings of leadership rooted in local cultural traditions are constructed, interpreted, and communicated through journalistic discourse. Furthermore, the role of cultural journalism in fulfilling the press's social responsibility function during periods of political transition remains underexplored. Addressing this gap is crucial not only for understanding the historical significance of the RSP but also for broadening scholarly discussions on the relationship between journalism, culture, and ethical leadership.

Thus, this study explores how *Hasta Brata* leadership values are constructed, articulated, and communicated through RSP's cultural journalism practices. Therefore, this study is relevant to understanding how the meaning of *Hasta Brata* leadership is constructed through journalistic practices within the broader framework of press social responsibility.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To explore how cultural meanings were constructed and communicated through the journalistic practices of the Sang Pamomong Rubric (RSP) from 1996 to 1998.
2. To examine how the Sang Pamomong Rubric (RSP) fulfilled the social function of the press in the socio-political context of Indonesia's democratic transition.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How did the Sang Pamomong Rubric (RSP) construct and communicate cultural meanings through journalistic practices from 1996 to 1998?
2. How did the Sang Pamomong Rubric (RSP) fulfill the social function of the press during Indonesia's transition from the end of the New Order period to the beginning of the Reformation Era?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Olsen (2019) examines how local newspapers create social, cultural, and democratic value for their communities amidst the pressures of digitalization. Using a qualitative approach within a constructivist paradigm and based on a case study of local media in Norway, Olsen argues that the sustainability of local media depends not only on economic factors but also on social relations and public trust. This study identifies three main dimensions of value creation: strengthening local identity, preserving cultural heritage, and fulfilling a social watchdog function. These findings are relevant to this study because both view media as cultural institutions that generate social meanings and values. However, while Olsen focuses on local media in the Norwegian context, this study examines Javanese cultural and the articulation of *Hasta Brata* leadership values through RSP journalistic practices.

Dunne (2017) explores the institutionalization of independent press regulation within a liberal media system through comparative case studies in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Norway. Based on a constructivist perspective, this study explores how press freedom and social responsibility are negotiated between the state, media institutions, and the public. Drawing on normative media theory, social responsibility theory, and institutional theory, Dunne finds that independent regulation does not undermine press freedom; instead, it strengthens professional legitimacy and public trust. This study is relevant because it highlights the ethical and social dimensions of journalism, although it differs from this research in its cultural context and focus on Javanese cultural journalism influenced by *Hasta Brata* values.

Despite the growing body of leadership and media studies, limited attention has been paid to how local leadership values are constructed and communicated through journalistic discourse. Studies on *Hasta Brata* have largely emphasized cultural, philosophical, or ethical perspectives, while its representation in journalistic practice remains underexplored. To address this gap, this study examines how *Hasta Brata* leadership values are constructed in the Press Social Responsibility Theory, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of local media as cultural agents in shaping ethical leadership discourse during periods of political transition.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach within a constructivist paradigm that views social reality as the result of the construction of meaning formed through experience, social interaction, and specific cultural contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 1997). From this perspective, RSP is a product of journalistic practice that not only conveys information but also represents cultural values and the social responsibility of the press. The research employed a single intrinsic case study design by Yin (2015), focusing on the RSP in the Suara Merdeka newspaper as a unique cultural journalism phenomenon. The units of observation were eight RSPs published between 1996 and 1998, while the units of analysis focused on eight articles purposively selected to meet the research objectives.

Data were collected through document observation of RSP articles, semi-structured interviews with the Suara Merdeka editorial staff, and relevant documentation and literature review. Data analysis employed the interactive model by Miles et al. (2014), which included data condensation, data presentation, and drawing and verifying conclusions. In the data condensation stage, researchers selected, focused, and organized data according to the research focus. The data were then analyzed by referring to the three functions of the press in the theory of social responsibility: social oversight, information, and public sphere (McQuail, 2010). Furthermore, the data were presented in descriptive form, tables, and analysis matrices to facilitate the identification of relationships between findings. The validity of the findings was maintained through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as stated by Stahl & King (2020).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

Social Function of the Press, "Sang Pamomong" Column (1996–1998)

The author explores eight articles related to the social functions of the press, including its social oversight/moral guardian function (social criticism), information function, and public space function, as well as cultural heritage, according to the perspective of the Social Responsibility of the Press theory (McQuail, 2010).

Of the eight articles analyzed, six emphasized social critique through cultural criticism. Rather than presenting criticism directly and confrontationally, the column used cultural values and ethical reflection as a basis for evaluating social and political realities. In this case, leadership values derived from Javanese cultural traditions were used as normative references for assessing the behavior of public officials, bureaucrats, social elites, and political actors.

The following is an analysis of these eight articles.

1. 'Jangan Seperti Katak dalam Tempurung!' ('Don't Have a Narrow World View!')

Analysis: This article, published on November 21, 1996, demonstrates the informative function of the press, the public sphere, and cultural heritage (McQuail, 2010). The informative function is achieved through the presentation of knowledge regarding Javanese leadership values, particularly the concept of *Hasta Brata*, which Harmoko describes as a teaching that possesses "noble" and "universal" values. Through this interview, readers gain an understanding of leadership principles such as "aja kagetan, aja gumunan lan aja dumeh," which are considered relevant in modern life.

As a public space, this article presents a dialogue between journalists and sources regarding the challenges of preserving Javanese culture amidst globalization and the penetration of foreign cultures. This discussion opens up a space for shared reflection on the position of local culture in a constantly changing society. Meanwhile, the function of cultural heritage is explored through the ways in which caretakers document and transmit Javanese teachings, symbols, and philosophies, including the concepts of "alon-alon waton kelakon," "nguwongke wong," and "manunggaling kawula-gusti." Thus, this article not only conveys information but also serves as a medium for preserving Javanese cultural values for a wider generation (Sadono & Basuki, 1996).

2. 'Ketika Orang Jawa Menantikan 'Ratu Adil' (When the Javanese Await a 'Just King')

Analysis: This article, published on May 15, 1997, embodies the functions of social criticism, social oversight, and moral guardianship (McQuail, 2010). The social criticism function is highlighted through the use of the *Ratu Adil* discourse to reflect the social injustices perceived by society. Sindhunata asserts that the longing for a *Ratu Adil* emerges when "kings or other patrons of life spread disaster and injustice to the common people." This statement demonstrates a symbolic critique of practices of power perceived as deviating from the values of justice.

The social oversight function emerges from various sources' perspectives, interpreting the socio-political conditions at the time. Andrik Purwasito links this phenomenon to "various riots here and there, numerous labor unrest, and lawsuits against state officials." Meanwhile, the moral guardian function is reflected in the affirmation of the importance of law, justice, and religiosity. Damardjati Supadjar emphasizes the need for "situations that foster increased religiosity among the people and their officials," thus encouraging ethical reflection on leadership and social life.

3. 'Martabat dalam Krisis Besar' (Dignity in a Time of Great Crisis)

Analysis: This article, published on November 6, 1997, reflects the functions of social criticism, social oversight, and moral guardianship (McQuail, 2010). The function of social criticism is reflected by highlighting the moral crisis plaguing contemporary Javanese society. Rendra criticized the emergence of a "culture of corruption, a robbery mentality, expansiveness, and the logic of a security guard in governing the state," while Mudji Sutrisno stated that Javanese people were facing a "major crisis" due to collusion, corruption, and authoritarianism.

The function of social oversight is evident from the diverse perspectives of cultural figures, academics, and palace figures in assessing the evolving social conditions. Through these perspectives, this article monitors and reveals the shifting meaning of dignity, which is increasingly measured by wealth and power. The function of moral guardianship is reflected in the affirmation of ethical values such as honesty, social service, and inner awareness. Darmanto Jatman emphasized that dignity cannot be achieved simply by "accumulating wealth, power, and intelligence," but rather through sincere devotion to society. Thus, this article invites readers to reflect on the meaning of dignity as a moral value above material interests.

4. 'Raja Tak Sekedar Berbekal *Pulung*' (A King Requires More Than Divine Fortune)

Analysis: This article, published on January 15, 1998, articulates the functions of social criticism, social oversight, and moral guardianship (McQuail, 2010). The function of social criticism is achieved through the deconstruction of leadership myths that rely on symbolic legitimacy such as *pulung* or descent. Doyo Santoso asserts that "*pulung* is merely a tool or myth used to legitimize power," so ideal leadership is not built solely through myth, but rather through social capacity and responsibility.

Various perspectives from historians, cultural scholars, and cultural practitioners evaluate the practice of power as an application of the function of social oversight. This article highlights that rulers who are unjust and neglect the people will lose legitimacy, as Amangkurat III was deemed "unwise and preferred to collude with foreigners." Meanwhile, the function of moral guardianship is reflected in the emphasis on Javanese leadership values such as justice, wisdom, concern for the people, and *memayu hayuning jagad*. Thus, this article examines Javanese history and culture and offers ethical reflections on responsible leadership oriented toward the welfare of society.

5. 'Birokrasi Dibuat untuk Keselarasan' (Bureaucracy Was Created for Harmony)

Analysis: This article, published on January 22, 1998, implements the functions of social criticism, social oversight, and moral guardianship (McQuail, 2010). The social criticism function is carried out through a discussion of bureaucratic weaknesses that actually give rise to abuse of power. Referring to Onghokham, this article reveals that the bureaucracy "was used to complicate and exploit the lives of the people." Furthermore, many VOC officials were involved in corruption and the selling of positions, which led to the decline of the institution itself. This criticism reflects the dangers of a bureaucracy that loses its orientation towards public service.

The social oversight function is presented through the perspectives of various historians and cultural experts to assess the bureaucracy's effectiveness in maintaining public order and welfare. This article represents the bureaucracy's success while highlighting various forms of abuse and their impact on the people's lives. Meanwhile, the moral guardian function is reflected in the assertion that an ideal bureaucracy should be oriented towards "*tata tentrem karta raharja*" (the principle of order and prosperity) and the common good. Finally, the article emphasizes that

social harmony can only be achieved through a combination of an effective bureaucracy and leaders with credibility, integrity, and responsibility to the community.”

6. ‘Gaya Hidup Boros Akibatkan Elite Jawa Runtuh’ (The Extravagant Lifestyle that Led to the Decline of the Javanese Elite)

Analysis: This article, published on February 12, 1998, demonstrates the application of the functions of social criticism, social oversight, and moral guardianship (McQuail, 2010). The function of social criticism is evident through an evaluation of the behavior of the Javanese elite, which is considered to have contributed to social and political decline. The article highlights the practice of re-feudalization, a consumerist lifestyle, polygamy, gambling, and dependence on debt. Djuliaty Suroyo asserts that "it was this extravagant lifestyle that ultimately led them into debt," so that the downfall of the elite is understood as a consequence of their own behavioral choices.

The columnist reveals the dynamics of power and elite life by presenting the views of various historians, cultural figures, and academics. Through these diverse sources, the article examines how social status, privilege, and power can be abused to the detriment of society.

Meanwhile, the function of moral guardianship is reflected in the assertion that the ideal elite should serve as role models. Karkono K. Partokusumo states that the priyayi were once respected for demonstrating "heroism, honesty, and chivalry." Thus, this article reviews the history of the Javanese elite, and invites readers to reflect on the importance of integrity, simplicity, and moral responsibility in public life.

7. ‘Idiom Kepemimpinan Jawa Runtuh Akibat Dimanipulasi’ (Javanese Leadership Idioms Collapse Due to Manipulation)

Analysis: This article, published on 03/09/1998, represents the functions of social criticism, social oversight, and moral guardianship (McQuail, 2010). The function of social criticism emphasizes the decline in public trust in Javanese leadership due to the misuse of cultural values. Rama Sudi Yarmana stated that "Javanese leadership idioms are actually still good, but because many Javanese officials manipulate them, this nation's trust in Javanese leaders has diminished." This criticism is directed at elite practices deemed no longer in line with ideal leadership values.

The function of social oversight is evident through the presentation of diverse views from cultural figures, academics, psychics, and ordinary citizens regarding the figure and criteria for future leaders. The media served as a space for public dialogue that monitored and evaluated leadership dynamics during the political transition of the 1998 Reformation.

Meanwhile, the function of moral guardianship is reflected in the affirmation of the importance of integrity, democracy, and ethical responsibility. Damardjati Supadjar reminded the public to "never manipulate teachings," while Mudji Sutrisno emphasized that the leader needed is a "democratic" figure. Thus, this article discusses Javanese leadership, and offers moral reflections on the character of a leader worthy of public trust.

8. ‘Sultan HB X Dianggap ”Ratu Adil” (Sultan Hamengkubuwono X Is Considered a ‘Just King’)

Analysis: This article, published on October 9, 1998, implements the informative, public space, and cultural heritage functions (McQuail, 2010). The informative function provides information related to the political and social dynamics in Yogyakarta leading up to the gubernatorial election, while also explaining the strong reasons for public support for **Sultan Hamengku Buwono X**.

The article presents various perspectives, depicting the Sultan as a leader who "always provides a sense of calm and serenity" and a figure who "is not a figure who asks to be served, but rather serves the people" (Moedjanto).

The public space function is reflected in diverse voices, from pedicab drivers and traders to academics, cultural figures, and intellectuals. These diverse perspectives are brought together in a discursive space to discuss leadership, democracy, and public aspirations for an ideal leader. Thus, the media serves as an arena for dialogue between the people and the elite.

Meanwhile, the cultural heritage function is reflected in the reproduction and reinterpretation of Javanese cultural concepts such as Ratu Adil (just king), Kawula Alit (the small people), and the relationship between leaders and the people in the context of modern democracy. The statement that "Ngarso Dalem punika ratu adil" shows how Javanese leadership values remain alive in the public consciousness and are passed down as part of a cultural identity that continues to be negotiated in the Reformation era.

Table 1: Implementation of the Social Functions of the Press
 of the Rubrik "Sang Pamomong" (1996–1998)

No	Article Title	Edition	Writer	Social Functions	Information
1.	Don't have a narrow world view	11/21/1996	Bambang Sadono & Hendro Basuki	Informative and Cultural Public Sphere	<i>Hasta Brata</i> Leadership Philosophy
2.	When the Javanese Await a 'Just King'	05/15/1997	Triyanto Triwikromo & Hendro Basuki	Social control	Expectations of the Ideal Leader
3.	Dignity in a Time of Great Crisis	11/06/1997	Triyanto Triwikromo & Hendro Basuki	Social control	Criticism of national leadership
4.	A King Requires More Than Divine Fortune	01/15/1998	Triyanto Triwikromo & Hendro Basuki	Social control	<i>Hasta Brata</i> Leadership Philosophy
5.	Bureaucracy Was Created for Harmony	01/22/1998	Triyanto Triwikromo & Hendro Basuki	Social control	Criticism of the condition of the nation's leadership
6.	The Extravagant Lifestyle that Led	02/12/1998	Triyanto Triwikromo &	Social control	Criticism of the lifestyle of leaders

	to the Decline of the Javanese Elite		Hendro Basuki		
7.	Javanese Leadership Idioms Collapse Due to Manipulation	09/03/1998	Triyanto Triwikromo & Hendro Basuki	Social control	Criticism of national leadership
8.	Sultan Hamengkubuwono X Is Considered a 'Just King'	09/10/1998	Triyanto Triwikromo & Hendro Basuki	Informative and Cultural Public Sphere	Expectations of the Ideal Leader

(Source: Researcher Processing, 2026)

Overall, the eight RSP articles from 1996-1998 each represent important themes: leadership, the just king, bureaucracy, dignity, the Javanese elite, and the values of Hasta Brata. These eight articles were selected purposively because they represent the construction of Hasta Brata leadership values within the cultural section of that edition.

4.2 Discussion

This study demonstrates that RSP, as both an information channel and a cultural space, constructs and preserves social values through its journalistic practices. From a constructivist perspective, media functions as an arena where social meaning is actively constructed through the practices of media actors who interpret, select, and represent reality within a particular value framework (Denzin & Lincoln, 1997). In this regard, RSP illustrates how culture-based journalism contributes to shaping public understanding of social reality, particularly through the internalization of Javanese cultural values that continue to develop in social life.

The findings also indicate that the social watchdog function in RSP operates differently from conventional watchdog journalism generally associated with the Western liberal press tradition. While Western media often emphasizes direct critique of power, RSP tends to use symbols, metaphors, and cultural values as vehicles for social critique. Criticism of bureaucracy, elite lifestyles, abuse of power, and distortions of leadership values is conveyed through cultural reflections rooted in Javanese teachings.

Informant TRT (2025), Deputy Editor-in-Chief of "Suara Merdeka," explained that RSP places leadership issues within the broader framework of national social concerns. According to TRT, socio-political dynamics are often interpreted through representations of leadership values, symbols, and practices derived from traditional Javanese values, particularly the concept of Hasta Brata.

Furthermore, informant HB, News Coordinator of "Suara Merdeka" (at the time, 1996) and one of the founders and managers of RSP, explained that the values of Hasta Brata, represented through the personification of the eight natural elements of "earth," "sun," "sky," and "stars," are reflected in how the editorial team designs and manages RSP. He emphasized that RSP's strength lies in its ability to convey reminders through "gentle yet meaningful language."

Similarly, GBS, the editor in charge of the RSP page, added that this strategy demonstrates how the social watchdog function does not always need to be expressed through open confrontation. Instead, criticism can be conveyed through cultural mechanisms that remain effective in communicating critical messages to the public.

This condition cannot be separated from the socio-political context of Indonesia during the 1996–1998 period. As the New Order regime neared its end, press freedom was still subject to various restrictions, and expressions of criticism of the government were often conducted indirectly (Suwirta, 2018; Imron et al., 2016). In such a context, the use of *pasemon* (figurative expressions), cultural symbols, and reflective narratives became communication strategies that allowed the media to continue carrying out its social watchdog function without engaging in direct confrontation with those in power. These findings demonstrate that journalistic practice is never separate from its social context, but is always negotiated within the cultural and political structures in which it operates.

This finding aligns with Olsen (2019), who argues that local media possess social and cultural values that cannot be reduced solely to economic functions or the dissemination of information. Through its closeness to the local context, media can function as a space for preserving cultural identity and a means of constructing social meaning within society.

In this context, the existence of media with its social and cultural functions is also inseparable from the regulatory mechanisms and institutional practices that accompany it. Dunne (2017) explains that the social responsibility of the press, including the protection of press freedom, is formed through a process of negotiation between the state, media institutions, and the public. This interaction not only maintains a balance between freedom and accountability but also contributes to strengthening the legitimacy of media professionals and increasing public trust.

Furthermore, the use of this cultural framework opens up space for the emergence of media functions as a cultural public sphere. The RSP represents cultural values in its reporting and serves as a platform for various social actors to engage in discourse about the nation's social realities. The presence of academics, cultural figures, public intellectuals, and members of the public encourages dynamic dialogue within the public sphere. Thus, the RSP serves as a communicative arena that encourages cross-group participation in shaping ideas about ideal leadership. Furthermore, it highlights the role of local media as a facilitator of social dialogue rooted in the cultural experiences of the community.

Synthesis: Social Critique, Informativeness, Public Space, and Cultural Heritage

The Rubrik Sang Pamomong (RSP) from 1996 to 1998 played a role in conveying value-laden information, integrating the principles of truth, virtue, and Javanese cultural heritage, so that the public could obtain ethical guidance in assessing everyday phenomena. Research by Tejedor et al. (2020) emphasized the press's duty to provide informative content and avoid sensationalism in its texts—in accordance with the theory of press social responsibility. Valuable information is essential because it is needed by the public. This aligns with research by Planer et al. (2022) that states that the public has the right to receive accurate and reliable information.

Regarding its function of presenting information—although not directly addressing it, the RSP in its early period constructed meanings related to the decline of ethical leadership. This was demonstrated through depictions of leaders who were less sensitive, increasingly distant from the people, and even unable to maintain harmony between power and responsibility.

In the tradition of press social responsibility thought, the RSP serves as a public educator, guardian of noble values, and cultural heritage. Research by Oso et al. (2024) demonstrates that journalistic ethics require journalists to understand, respect, and preserve cultural diversity. This function enables the press to participate in preserving, transmitting, and mediating cultural values through reporting practices. Research by Realgo (2023) emphasizes the role of media in the preservation, reproduction, and intergenerational transmission of cultural heritage. Media are required to maintain the continuity of a society's values, identity, and cultural heritage.

Through narratives that address issues such as moral crises, social injustice, and leadership practices, the column emphasizes the importance of self-awareness, responsibility for others, and universal concern. Content that emphasizes education on values, ethics, and local wisdom creates a space for the public to deeply understand social dynamics. Articles in this period guide readers in responding to social events and policies that impact the community, fostering moral reflection and a wise attitude in everyday life.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the RSP in the "Suara Merdeka" newspaper from 1996–1998 served not only as a platform for disseminating journalistic information but also as a form of cultural journalism with a broader social role. An analysis of eight articles reveals that the RSP fulfilled three primary press functions: information, social oversight, and a cultural public sphere, encouraging the exchange of ideas based on cultural values.

In practice, the RSP's social oversight function was not realized through direct criticism of power, but through a reflective approach based on Javanese culture, including the use of symbols, metaphors, and ethical values embodied in the Hasta Brata philosophy. This approach demonstrates that journalism can adapt to specific socio-political contexts, particularly during periods when press freedom was still limited in the lead-up to the Reformation transition in Indonesia. Thus, social criticism did not disappear but underwent a transformation into more subtle, symbolic, and cultural forms.

Furthermore, the RSP demonstrates the important role of local media in building a discursive space that brings together diverse perspectives, from academics and cultural figures to the general public. This confirms that the media functions not only as a disseminator of news but also as an arena for producing social meaning, contributing to the formation of public awareness regarding leadership and ethical values in social life.

Theoretically, this finding emphasizes that the social function of the press can be carried out through a cultural approach, not just through open (confrontational) criticism. This study also emphasizes the relevance of cultural journalism as an alternative approach to understanding the relationship between media, culture, and power in a local context.

Thus, RSP is a journalistic practice that highlights social realities and constructs the meaning of leadership through cultural values embedded in Javanese society.

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