

## **Not just a radio station, a social institution**

By: Ruth Kronenburg

Free Press Unlimited director Ruth Kronenburg recently travelled to Indonesia to attend an international conference in Jakarta. Below she describes a detour she took to a community radio partner of her organization there, a talk station that operates in a unique way.

“When you’re in Indonesia, go visit Suara Surabaya,” suggested my colleague Dessi Damianova, our program director South and Southeast Asia. “It has a strong vision and inspiring leadership.” This I wanted to see for myself, so after the conference was finished I headed to Surabaya, 750 kilometers east of Jakarta.

### **A city of 6 million people**

Radio Suara Surabaya, ‘Voice of Surabaya’, has a reputation for exploring solutions to the issues the community faces. And Surabaya has big issues, especially related to infrastructure. The city has three million inhabitants, but during the day this number doubles. It’s a crazy place. I go to see Errol Jonathans, CEO of the radio station and he shows me around the station’s spacious offices. What a difference compared to the hustle and bustle outside! It operates like a well-oiled machine, with everyone knowing exactly what to do.

### **Bringing people together**

Jonathans has a modest demeanor, but he is eloquent and even passionate about the radio station’s objective: to bring people together and offer them a better life.

According to a recent audience survey, Suara Surabaya reaches over 600,000 people every day. When it started in 1983, most radio stations targeted young people with pop music and games. There was hardly any airtime for in-depth reporting. Suara Surabaya filled that gap and gradually evolved into the city’s talk station.

### **Looking for solutions**

It is now so popular that even the mayor and the police commander call in to comment. And that is exactly what Jonathans envisioned when he started the station. He wants to listen to people and their problems, but he also wants to find solutions. This has become Suara Surabaya’s defining trait. Listeners who call in do not get airtime if they do nothing but complain, they need to come up with ideas to solve the city’s problems as well.

Jonathans gives an example of how the station’s approach works: “A couple of years ago, the city faced a garbage crisis. The government simply couldn’t handle the immense growth of the city.” The station asked local people what problems they were facing and how they thought the situation might be solved, and then asked officials to respond to these ideas.

### **Callers from the US and Australia**

“We even got callers from Sydney and California,” Jonathans remembers “It showed how far our broadcasts reach and how involved the public is.” In the

end, garbage management was improved. Surabaya is now one of the cleanest cities in Indonesia. While talking, we stroll into the studios. I realise they look different from any I have seen before. There is a window in every studio cabin, with a view on to the street, as if to be part of the everyday life of the community. The station helps locals with 'small' problems such as finding a stolen car, or returning an elderly person suffering from dementia to their home, small things that show how effective it is as community station. Jonathans gives another example of inspiring reporting by his colleagues. In the past, the streets of Surabaya flooded during the monsoon. Diseases spread, animals sought shelter in houses and traffic jams were even bigger than usual, simply because the sewers couldn't handle the rain. Thanks to Suara Surabaya's broadcasts, the city council could identify where the problems were the biggest, so that these could be addressed first.

### **Live speech by mayor**

The mayor spoke live on the radio to explain why it took time to deal with the flooding, creating a better understanding among listeners. Jonathans: "Nowadays during the monsoon, the streets are flooded, but for a maximum of two hours instead of for days on end."

"Suara Surabaya is about helping people to talk freely, to give their opinion," explains Jonathans. "So not just to criticize, but to go a step further. In the end it improves the lives of everyone involved. Actually, we are not just a radio station - we are a social institution."