



## Research Article

# Targeting the Intellectuals: Advertising and Propaganda for the Lampung Colonization Program in Newspapers (1930–1941)

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## Abstract

This study investigates the Dutch East Indies government's strategic promotion of "colonization"—a state-managed migration program aimed at relocating populations from densely populated Java to Lampung between 1930 and 1941. This era marks the third and peak phase of the program, characterized by both policy shifts and a significant surge in participation. Employing historical methods and archival discourse analysis, the research examines a corpus of newspapers published within this timeframe. Findings reveal a strategic alignment between colonial recruitment strategies and pro-migration narratives specifically designed to target the educated "intellectual" class. Unlike traditional methods, the government utilized sophisticated propaganda strategically embedded within news columns to project an appearance of objectivity and bypass the critical defenses of literate readers. This study contributes a nuanced perspective to the historiography of colonial migration and press history, illustrating how media discourse was engineered as a sophisticated recruitment tool during a period of global economic depression.

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## INTRODUCTION

The early 20th century marked a transformative period in the Dutch East Indies, highlighted by the implementation of the Ethical Policy (Setiawan, [2015](#)) and the expansion of modern imperialism beyond Java (Alfian, [2016](#); Lindblad, [1989](#); Locher-Scholten, [1994](#), [2008](#)). A cornerstone of this agenda was the "colonization" program, designed to relocate populations from densely populated Java to regions like Lampung. While early resettlement initiatives (1905–1929) faced challenges in large-scale mobilization, the 1930s marked a strategic shift. The colonial government began leveraging the burgeoning newspaper industry as an efficient propaganda medium, transitioning beyond mere reportage to actively recruit the educated class for colonization.

The term "immigration" was later given the name "colonization" by the colonial government. The concept was to facilitate the movement of people from densely populated areas to areas with lower population densities. This policy was initiated by research conducted by Heyting, an Assistant Resident of Sukabumi, at the order of the Dutch Governor-General at that time, Willem Rooseboom (1899-1904). The Kedu region was used as the subject of the research. The Kedu Residency consisted of five districts: Magelang, Temanggung, Purworejo, Kebumen, and Wonosobo (Graaf & Stibbe, [1918](#)). His findings highlighted the urgent need to address the population issue in the region, as it posed a significant challenge to the community's well-being (Dahlan, [2014](#); Sudarno, [2020](#)).

The colonization program can be divided into three periods, the first of which spanned from 1905 to 1911 and is often referred to as the "experimental period." The second period occurred from 1911 to 1929, a time which also marked the introduction of the Lampung Credit Bank, an extension of the colonial government that facilitated the provision of premiums or allowances to migrants. The third period spanned from 1930 to 1941, during which the colonial government initiated the implementation of relatively stringent regulations, notably concerning the allocation of subsidies to participants in colonization. This was precipitated by the global economic depression that was prevailing at the time. Consequently, the *Bawon System*, also known as a crop sharing arrangement, was introduced to attract

farming families from Java who were still interested in relocating to Lampung (Heeren, 1979). During this third period, the colonial government initiated a substantial propaganda campaign to promote the migration or colonization program. One of the media utilized for this purpose was newspapers.

A number of historians have undertaken research initiatives related to this colonization program. Levang (2003), provided a comprehensive explanation of the colonization program, encompassing its background, challenges, and achievements in political and operational terms. Putra (2021), has also described how the Dutch East Indies government propagated the colonization program. Thirdly, Dahlan (2014), compared migration patterns across three eras: Dutch, Japanese, and Indonesian. These three previous studies are interconnected, complementing one another. However, existing historiography has largely overlooked how specific media platforms were engineered as sophisticated recruitment tools targeting the educated “intellectual” class during the program's peak phase. This study addresses this gap by analyzing newspaper propaganda from 1930 to 1941, illustrating how colonial media discourse was strategically manipulated to construct a utopian narrative and mobilize literate demographics. According to previous research on colonization programs, colonization was indeed one of the most pragmatic solutions for the Dutch East Indies government at that time to reduce population density in Java. In addition, the *malaise* that occurred in the 1930s had a severe impact on the economy, particularly in Java (Boeke, 1934; Van Bergen, 2018). A significant number of individuals lost their jobs when the factories or plantations where they were employed closed. Export commodities lost their value. In response to this crisis, the Dutch East Indies government, through the Central Commission for Emigration and Colonization (Central Commissie Voor Emigratie en Kolonisatie), revived the colonization program in Lampung and expanded its target areas to include South Sumatra and Celebes, also known as Sulawesi.

The efficacy of this propaganda was heavily contingent upon the severe economic decline of the 1930s *Malaise*. As Harold Lasswell's theories on propaganda suggest, severe economic and political distress often diminishes public critical thinking, rendering populations more susceptible to state-engineered messaging (Hoffer, 1942; Lasswell, 1927). Amidst these challenging circumstances, the government's colonization narrative provided a compelling alternative to economic desperation (Hoffer, 1942; Lasswell, 1927).

Within the context of Indonesian historiography, newspapers have been identified as an essential medium, as they provide insight into the social history of the Dutch East Indies, as well as the history of the press itself. They also reveal how the development of printing in the Dutch East Indies influenced the social life of its people. The early 20th century marked a period of rapid growth for the newspaper industry. The prevalence of regional newspapers in major cities throughout the Dutch East Indies was a natural consequence of the rising educational attainment of the native population. The increasing literacy rate necessitated the use of newspapers as a medium for advertising, which in turn became an essential component of modern society. The government recognized the effectiveness of newspapers as a medium for propaganda and began to utilize them to disseminate their policies.

The following research questions were then raised: What were the strategic reasons for the Dutch colonial government's transition to using newspapers as a primary medium for promoting the colonization program? How did various types of newspapers tailor their content to target and recruit the educated class? and, to what extent did this newspaper-based propaganda campaign influence the dynamics and outcomes of the colonization program (1930–1941)?

## METHOD

This study employs the historical method consisting of four systematic stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Gottschalk, 1986). The research focuses on the third period of the colonization program, spanning from 1930 to 1941. Primary references for this study are archival sources, including government reports and newspapers published during the specified period. These newspapers were accessed through digital archives, specifically *Khastara Perpusnas* for Malay-language publications and *Delpher* for Dutch-language newspapers.

The sampling strategy focused on newspapers that targeted a wide market, including the indigenous population and the educated class. The corpus includes titles such as *Mata-Hari*, *Sipatahoenan*, and *Berita Priangan*. These selected newspapers generally possessed pro-government, neutral, or commercial tendencies, which made them effective conduits for state narratives. Because these commercial and neutral newspapers were perceived as more credible by the indigenous educated class compared to official government publications, they were highly influential in shaping public opinion. To identify relevant data, the search prioritized content regarding the recruitment of 'intellectuals' or the educated class, as this group became a primary focus of the colonial government during the 1930s.

Operationally, propaganda was identified through a qualitative analysis of newspaper layout and rhetoric. Unlike standard advertisements that occupied specific commercial columns, the propaganda for the colonization program was strategically embedded within news and important report sections to project an appearance of objectivity. The identification process focused on "persuasive utopian" styles of writing that offered prosperity to counter negative stigmas regarding the Lampung region.

In the source criticism and interpretation stages, internal criticism was applied by cross-referencing identical editorial content found in different publications. For instance, identical reports published in *Mata-Hari* and *Sipatahoenan* in February 1938 were analyzed to understand how narratives were synchronized across different platforms. This methodology allows for a reconstruction of how the Dutch East Indies government utilized the newspaper industry to control information and influence public perception during a period of significant economic depression (Gottschalk, [1986](#)).

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Problems in Java and the Periodization of Colonization in Lampung

Agrarian problems in Java were a chronic phenomenon that began as early as the 1820s. The economic structure of Javanese society was significantly disrupted by the implementation of the forced cultivation system (*cultuurstelsel*), which mandated the surrender of productive land for export crops. This policy resulted in a substantial reduction of available land for food crops and housing for the Javanese people. This condition was further exacerbated by a population explosion; according to the 1920 census, nearly 35 million people resided in Java and Madura, accounting for 70% of the total population of the Dutch East Indies. Clifford Geertz described this ecological and social pressure as "shared poverty," where Javanese villages functioned as a safety net for a population that lacked access to capital-intensive economies (Geertz, [2016](#); Pelzer, [1948](#); Zwemer, [1923](#)).

During the third period of colonization (1930–1941), these structural population issues collided with the global economic depression, or *Malaise*, which severely impacted the Dutch East Indies. The crisis paralyzed the export sector, led to the closure of factories and plantations, and triggered mass unemployment across Java. The collapse of the Lampung Credit Bank in 1929 marked the end of the previous credit-based financing era, forcing the colonial government to adopt a more cost-effective mechanism known as the *bawon* or crop-sharing system. In this context, the colonization program evolved beyond a mere demand of Ethical Policy into a concrete and urgent practical solution to alleviate the socio-economic tensions caused by land shortages and unemployment (Hendriks, [2014](#); Putra, [2021](#)).

A primary finding of this study is the fundamental transformation of recruitment criteria during this third phase. While previous periods prioritized traditional farmers, the government now sought to establish a "complete modern community" in the colonies. Consequently, the recruitment focus was expanded to include the educated class, often referred to as 'intellectuals.' The inclusion of individuals with literacy skills and secondary education backgrounds was deemed vital for managing social structures and administrative organizations in the colonization areas, as the existing agrarian-focused

recruitment had previously resulted in a lack of human resources capable of managing communal administration.

This shift toward targeting the educated class necessitated a radical change in communication instruments and recruitment methods. Traditional direct socialization in villages—which often involved expensive performances such as *wayang* or *ludruk*—was deemed too costly and ineffective for reaching this new demographic (Heeren, 1979; Hendriks, 2014; Pelzer, 1946). Instead, the rapid growth of the newspaper industry provided an efficient medium with broad reach to target the literate segment of society. The government strategically utilized newspapers to disseminate persuasive, utopian narratives that offered visions of prosperity and success, aimed specifically at countering long-standing negative stigmas regarding Lampung as a remote or haunted wilderness.

The integration of economic crisis and the need for educated recruits reinforced the efficacy of the propaganda campaign. According to Harold Lasswell's theory, the economic and political depression of the era caused a loss of critical thinking skills among the population, rendering them more susceptible to propaganda. Amidst these challenging circumstances, the government's colonization propaganda was regarded as an 'oasis of hope'. Thus, newspapers functioned not merely as technical information channels but were engineered into powerful psychological instruments to mobilize the educated class toward Lampung (Lasswell, 1927).

### The Media of Propaganda

Propaganda for colonization during the third period (1930–1941) operated within a complex media ecosystem, ranging from direct socialization in rural villages to the utilization of modern media such as films and brochures. While the government continued to employ traditional methods—including entertaining performances like *wayang* or *ludruk* to gather residents—these activities were increasingly deemed too costly and ineffective for reaching specific government targets. Furthermore, given the limited literacy rates among the general population, mass media propaganda was unable to reach all social strata equally. Consequently, the colonial government implemented a layered communication strategy, positioning newspapers as a strategic medium to specifically target the literate and educated segments of society (Pelzer, 1948; Putra, 2021).



**Figure 1.** Movie poster, “Tanah Sabrang.”  
Source: Het Beloofde Laand an de Overkant (Hendriks, 2014).

The utilization of newspapers as a propaganda tool was inseparable from the rapid growth of the press industry in the Dutch East Indies, particularly the flourishing Malay-language press that targeted the wider indigenous market. Within this complex press landscape, the colonial government selectively leveraged newspapers with pro-government, neutral, or commercial orientations—such as *Mata-Hari* in Semarang and *Sipatahoenan* in Bandung—to disseminate colonization narratives. The selection of these specific titles was deliberate; the credibility of commercial and neutral newspapers among the educated indigenous population was significantly higher than that of rigid official government publications (Salmon, [1981](#); Surjomihardjo et al., [2004](#); Zwemer, [1923](#)).

A central and original contribution of this study reveals a sophisticated information engineering strategy, wherein colonization propaganda was not placed within conventional advertisement or advertorial columns. Instead, such materials were strategically embedded within main news sections and important report columns, interspersed with daily news, as explicitly demonstrated in the layout of the *Berita Priangan* and *Mata-Hari* newspapers (see Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4 and Figure 5). This strategic placement aimed to create an "illusion of objectivity," where the government's persuasive messages masqueraded as factual and credible journalistic reports. By disguising propaganda as news, the colonial government effectively sought to bypass the critical defenses of intellectuals who were often highly skeptical of overt political advertising.



**Figure 2.** *Berita Priangan* Newspaper, August 27, 1938.

Source: National Library of Indonesia ("Kolonisatie Kaoem Terpeladjar," [1938b](#)).

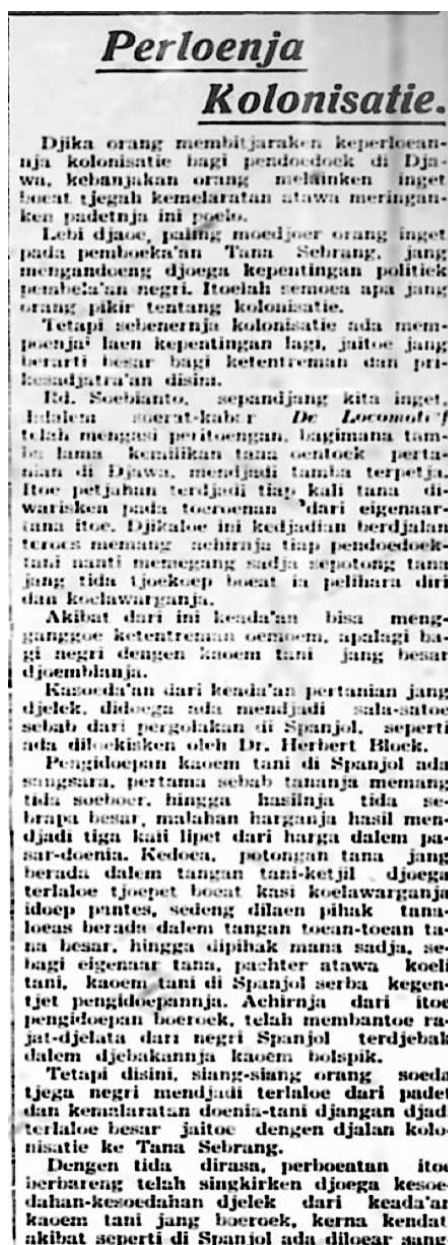


Figure 3. *Mata-Hari* newspaper, 1938.

Source: National Library of Indonesia ("Sepotong Tanah Djawa Di Sumatera Selatan," 1938).

Evidence of this synchronized narrative is clearly observed in the appearance of identical editorial content across different newspapers within the same period. For instance, the February 1938 editions of both *Mata-Hari* and *Sipatahoenan* featured identical reports concerning the development of colonization areas. This indicates a sized control of information, likely managed through the *Central Commissie Voor Emigratie en Kolonisatie*, ensuring that the utopia narrative—depicting a prosperous, modern, and crime-free region—was uniformly distributed to educated readers. While newspapers served as the primary focus, the government supplemented this propaganda ecosystem with supporting media to reinforce the message. Specialized publications such as the *Kolonisatie Bulletin* magazine and books like *Ajo Menjang Colonization* (1940) provided in-depth technical information for prospective colonists. On the audiovisual front, the launch of the documentary film *Tanah Sabrang* in the late 1930s served to visualize the success stories constructed in the press, showcasing modern irrigation infrastructure and the fertile lands of Lampung. This integration of various media demonstrates that while newspapers functioned as the intellectual authority establishing the discourse, other media served as visual and technical anchors in the orchestration of Lampung's colonization propaganda (Hendriks, 2014).

## The Purpose of Newspaper Advertising

At the premiere of the documentary film “*Tanah Sabrang*” in Batavia on January 31, 1939, J.H.B. Kuneman, a member of the Dutch East Indies Council and the Central Commission for Colonization and Immigration of the Dutch East Indies, said,

“The Javanese are conservative, they are poor and prefer to be content with what they get after the harvest, they prefer and are loyal to the hardships of the villages rather than imagining prosperity in an unknown land across the sea. In Madura, the conditions are worse and therefore, it is clear that this state of mind and this state of mind can only be changed by intensive propaganda...” (“De Kolonisatie-Film „Tanah Sabrang” Première Ingeleid Door Edeleer Kuneman,” [1939](#)).

From that statement, we know that the implementation of intensive propaganda during the third phase of colonization was rooted in a specific colonial construction of the “mental condition” of Javanese society. J.H.B. Kuneman, a high-ranking colonial official, provided a subjective representation by labeling the Javanese as ‘conservative’ and ‘loyal’ to the hardships of the villages. From the government’s perspective, this perceived psychological barrier was viewed as the primary obstacle to the program’s success, leading Kuneman to conclude that such a mindset could only be altered through intensive propaganda. It must be emphasized that the label conservative was not a neutral description of ethnic character, but rather a discursive construction used to justify the necessity of state intervention through massive information engineering.

To provide analytical distance from these colonial claims, the socio-economic realities of the Javanese village must be examined as a more objective background. What colonial officials simplified as conservatism was, in reality, a highly rational survival mechanism in response to ecological pressures. Clifford Geertz’s analysis reveals that Javanese villages functioned as a vital ‘safety net’ in the face of population explosions and limited agricultural land. Through the practice of ‘shared poverty,’ the community maximized limited resources through intricate labor division and planting efficiency. Thus, the reluctance to migrate during that era was not a consequence of a lack of ambition or an archaic nature, but a rational response to preserve the social security provided by the village structure in contrast to the high risks of unknown foreign territories (Geertz, [2016](#)).

Advertisements or propaganda in newspapers were important for attracting the attention of intellectuals. The use of Malay was easier to understand and could be disseminated to the general public. However, that was not the only reason; the large-scale propaganda was carried out to deconstruct the structure of Javanese society, which was considered fearful and unwilling to take on challenges outside the island by colonial government. The technical reasons for using newspapers as a medium for propaganda were also based on efficiency and wide reach. There was no need to wait for scheduled direct government socialization. Newspapers could be printed every day without requiring a lot of manpower. Second, newspapers could be used repeatedly in various places. Examples include the *Mata-Hari* newspaper published in Semarang and *Sipatahoenan* published in Bandung. These two reasons are sufficient to explain why the mass media was used as a tool of colonial propaganda.

The strategic focus on ‘intellectuals’ was manifested through a sophisticated rhetorical style that utilized “utopian” imagery to redefine the identity of the colonization program. To attract indigenous readers, editorials were crafted to counter long-standing negative stigmas—such as the perception of Lampung as a haunted or impenetrable wilderness—by promising a vision of modern prosperity. This is evident in the specific choice of diction in headlines, such as the transition from “*oetan lebat*” (dense forest) to “*kota makmoer*” (prosperous city), and the description of the colony as a place where “*kedjahatan hampir tida dikenal*” (crime is almost unknown). Such phrasing was not merely descriptive but was designed to frame the colony as a superior alternative to the increasingly cramped and impoverished villages of Java (“Kolonisatie Kaeem Terpeladjar,” [1938a](#); “Sepotong Tanah Djawa Di Sumatera Selatan,” 1938; “Sepotong Tanah Djawa Di Sumatra Selatan,” [1938](#)).



Figure 4. Mata-Hari Newspaper, January 4, 1938.

Source: Khastara Perpunas ("Kolonisatie Oentoeek Kaeom Pemoeda Terpeladjar (Intellectueelen)," 1938).



Figure 5. Mata-Hari Newspaper, February 16, 1938.

Source: Khastara Perpunas ("Sepotong Tanah Djawa Di Sumatera Selatan," 1938).

Furthermore, the propaganda employed a "normalization" strategy by embedding persuasive content within the structural authority of newspaper layouts. Rather than occupying conventional advertising columns, which readers might view with skepticism, colonization reports were strategically integrated into news and important report sections. By masquerading as objective news, the colonial government leveraged the perceived credibility of the press to lower the critical defenses of the educated class. This is exemplified by the rhetoric that framed education as the "*pintoenja*" (the door) for youth to become colonists in one of the publications. This metaphor effectively rebranded colonization; it was no longer presented as a desperate migration for the landless poor, but as a prestigious and logical progression for the modern, educated Javanese 'intellectual' ("Kolonisatie Kaoem Terpeladjar," [1938a](#); "Kolonisatie Oentoek Kaoem Pemoeda Terpeladjar (Intellectueelen)," [1938](#)).

This engineering of information was particularly potent because it synchronized specific social organizations with media narratives. For instance, the formation of the *Menoedjoe Memberantas Penganggoeran Pemoeda* (MMPP) in Malang served as a tangible manifestation of this discourse, providing pre-departure training to ensure that young colonists possessed the "modern" agricultural skills required for the new social structure in Lampung. Through this combination of textual persuasion and institutional support, the colonial government successfully reconstructed the image of Lampung from a remote outpost into a flourishing center of modern civilization ("Kolonisatie Kaoem Terpeladjar," [1938a](#)).

### Impact of Propaganda

The massive propaganda campaign launched by the Dutch East Indies government during the peak phase of colonization (1930–1941) correlated with a significant surge in participation, reaching an unprecedented peak of 60,000 people by 1941 (Dahlan, [2014](#); Heeren, [1979](#); Levang, [2003](#)). However, this growth cannot be attributed solely to the efficacy of media discourse. Instead, this trend must be situated within the acute structural pressures in Java, specifically the global economic *Malaise* and chronic land shortages (Boeke, [1934](#)). Within this framework, newspaper propaganda functioned as a catalyst that framed the migration program as a credible 'oasis of hope' amidst widespread economic desperation, rather than acting as an independent causal factor.

The strategic ambition to recruit an 'intellectual' class to balance the social structure of the colonies faced significant practical challenges. While press discourse specifically targeted educated youth, historical reports indicate a persistent shortage of human resources capable of managing local administration in the settlements. Furthermore, the fact that approximately 30% of colonists failed to meet official selection criteria suggests a gap between the idealized narratives in the press and the sociological reality of the participants ("Pemandangan Singkat Dalem Tanah-Tanah Kolonisatie Di Lampung," [1939](#)). Due to the absence of specific statistical data on the educational backgrounds of these colonists, the actual success of recruiting 'intellectuals' remains difficult to measure precisely, indicating that the campaign may have been more effective at mobilizing the economically desperate than the educated elite.

Nevertheless, the qualitative impact of this propaganda is evident in the profound transformation of Lampung's public image. Through persistent editorial synchronization, the government successfully altered the long-standing stigma that portrayed Lampung as a remote, haunted, or impenetrable wilderness. Physical evidence, such as the construction of the 700-hectare irrigation system in the area now known as Metro, was strategically utilized in media narratives to project an image of modern civilization and agricultural prosperity ("Pemandangan Singkat Dalem Tanah-Tanah Kolonisatie Di Lampung," [1939](#)). This shift in perception not only fueled interest in Lampung but also influenced migration patterns toward other regions like South Sumatra and Celebes, proving the success of the media in redefining geographic and social boundaries.

At a broader structural level, while the number of participants increased, the program ultimately could not outpace the rapid population growth on the island of Java. The reliance on colonization persisted as a practical solution because industrialization in Java failed to absorb the labor force, which

remained largely confined to the informal agrarian sector. Despite these structural limitations, the colonial government's orchestration of information established a lasting discursive framework for state-managed migration. Ultimately, this propaganda forged a powerful discursive blueprint that the post-independence Indonesian government seamlessly inherited, ensuring that the colonial rhetoric of colonization fundamentally shaped the long-term transmigration discourse for decades to come.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the Dutch colonial government's transition to intensive newspaper propaganda during the third phase of colonization (1930–1941) was a calculated response to both economic necessity and a perceived psychological barrier within Javanese society. By constructing the Javanese as “conservative” and village-bound, the colonial administration justified a massive information engineering project designed to deconstruct traditional safety nets and replace them with a utopian vision of Lampung. A pivotal finding of this research is the strategic shift toward targeting the ‘intellectual’ or educated class through the press, utilizing newspapers as a sophisticated instrument of social engineering that offered prosperity as a modern professional opportunity rather than a mere survival strategy.

The efficacy of this propaganda lay not only in its wide reach and technical efficiency but also in its ‘mimetic’ quality. By embedding persuasive narratives within the authoritative structure of news columns rather than commercial advertisements, the colonial government successfully masked its political agenda as objective reporting. This strategy was intended to bypass the critical defenses of the educated elite, who were increasingly skeptical of overt state messaging. The resulting surge in participation to 60,000 people by 1941 underscores how the synchronization of media narratives—as seen in identical reports across titles like *Mata-Hari* and *Sipatahoenan*—could effectively mobilize the masses by aligning state interests with the aspirations of the literate public.

However, this study acknowledges significant limitations that warrant further investigation. Due to the scarcity of granular archival data regarding the specific educational backgrounds of colonists in the late 1930s, the precise quantitative success of the ‘intellectual recruitment’ strategy remains difficult to ascertain. Furthermore, while propaganda served as a vital catalyst in redefining the public image of Lampung, it must be viewed as part of a larger structural matrix; the global economic *Malaise* and acute land shortages in Java acted as powerful ‘push factors’ that worked in tandem with the pull of media narratives. The fact that 30% of participants failed to meet official criteria suggests a persistent gap between the sophisticated utopian discourse and the complex sociological reality of those who chose to migrate.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the historiography of the colonial press by illustrating how the media was engineered into a powerful psychological tool for state-managed migration. Beyond its immediate historical context, the propaganda campaign of the 1930s established a lasting discursive framework for colonization that transcended the colonial era. The transformation of Lampung from a stigmatized wilderness into a symbol of state-sponsored progress provided the ideological blueprint for the post-independence transmigration program. Ultimately, this study reveals that the history of colonization is also inherently a history of information control, where the production of knowledge and the orchestration of media were as central to state power as the physical movement of people.

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## Author contributions

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## Declarations

### Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

### Consent for publication

The authors have given approval for the publication of this manuscript.

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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