



The International Conference on Communication and Media 2014 (i-COME'14), 18-20 October 2014, Langkawi, MALAYSIA

Conceptualization of Investigative Journalism: The Perspectives of Malaysian Media Practitioners

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Abstract

This study explores the conceptualization of investigative journalism by Malaysian media practitioners through in-depth interviews. Their conceptualizations were stimulated by various values and factors affecting their practice. Using qualitative analysis software Nvivo, this study found four major themes that characterized the conceptualization of investigative journalism among Malaysian media practitioners. Although the stimuli are different from other countries, their perception on investigative journalism still concurred with general understanding, but they alter the practice to suit local media environment, values and culture.

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Peer-review under responsibility of School of Multimedia Technology & Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia.

Keywords: Investigative journalism; perceptions; Malaysian media

1. Conceptualizations of investigative journalism

The definition of investigative journalism is multifaceted (Houston, 2010). It is also known as exposé journalism, adversarial journalism, in-depth journalism, muckraking journalism, advocacy journalism, public service journalism, watchdog journalism and journalism of outrage. These names have various definitions, which reflect numerous conceptions. Among layman, the term investigative journalism invokes a picture of crime reporting. For some, any news is investigative because it requires research before the reporter can write the news. However, daily

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news and investigative news have differences, especially in terms of their depth, issues covered, focus and even the information-gathering techniques.

Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), the world largest non-profit investigative journalism association, defined investigative journalism as “systematic, in-depth, and original research and reporting, often involving the unearthing of secrets, heavy use of public records, and computer assisted reporting, with a focus on social justice and accountability” (Investigative Reporters & Editors, 1983). This definition clearly classifies standards for investigative reports in terms of specific criteria, the process of doing this reporting and the focus that distinguishes this journalism from the others. Scholars like Anderson and Benjaminson (1976), Greene (1981), Ullman and Honeyman (1983), Gaines (1998), Feldstein (2006) and Houston (2010) subscribed to this definition.

Most scholars who subscribe to this conception stressed on the importance of the reporter’s initiative in finding issues and doing the investigation on their own, not reporting of investigations made by authorities. However, there are scholars like Waisbord (2000) who contended that the American model of investigative journalism is extremely influential but it is not the only possible paradigm. He asserted that the meaning of investigative journalism varies according to dissimilar press traditions and conditions for journalistic practice in a country. The IRE definition which is heavily buried with American values and cultures does not suit South America because it has a different political, social and media environment. For example, he explained that the “it should be the original work of the reporter, not resulted from information provided by someone else” requirement in the American definition does not suit media and journalistic environment in South America. The absence of Freedom of Information (FOI) Act prevents reporters from getting information without help from sources. Because they do not have the luxury of examining government records to assist their investigation, information leaks are crucial for South American journalists.

This situation is also applicable to other countries especially developing democracies like Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand that do not have FOI Act. In these countries, how reporters get the information is not important but the societal-relevant results of their exposés. Protess, Cook, Doppelt, Ettema, Gordon, Leff, and Miller (1991) said that it is a sturdier way to differentiate investigative journalism from other kinds of journalism. Scholars like Ettema and Glasser (1988) resolved to the idea of investigative journalism is the journalism of outrage because the results of investigative journalism often led to public betterment and has a close tie with agenda building. Because the craft was born in the United States, it has been largely American phenomenon, practiced and researched mostly in that country. Armao (2000), who described investigative journalism as the literature of exposure, said that it was “spawned by a culture born in dissent and nurtured by laws that protect critics of government and ensure access to public proceedings and documents. Journalists around the world emulate techniques and news values they learned in this country.” (p. 36). However, scholars and practitioners around the world have various perceptions on investigative journalism, influenced by various stimuli like their values, factors and experience in practicing investigative journalism in their media environment. According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), these stimuli cannot be separated from journalism practices as it influences every step from information gathering to writing. Therefore, journalists emulate the American understanding but alter the practice to suit their media environment.

Because limited research investigating the conceptualization of investigative journalism by media practitioners in Malaysia, it is crucial for this study to discover their conceptualizations of investigative journalism if the craft is to be practiced efficiently. Their conceptualization is vital because they are the ones who implement their understanding in their reporting. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how Malaysian media practitioners conceptualized investigative journalism.

2. Methods

This study uses face-to-face in-depth interviews. It is an indispensable way to probe phenomena such as journalistic attitudes and perceptions. One cannot understand human actions without understanding the meaning that participants attribute to those actions – their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptive words. The researcher, therefore, needs to understand the deeper perspectives captured through face-to-face interaction (Berger, 2010; Marshall & Rossman, 2010). In this study, sixteen Malaysian media practitioners from different backgrounds, roles and experience in investigative journalism, were asked open ended questions to enables them to better express their perceptions of investigative journalism.

Purposive sampling is being used in selecting the informants by establishing a few characteristics to ensure the accuracy of the information gathered. Compulsory characteristics include the respondent must be either current or former editors/journalists from mainstream or alternative newspaper either in printed or online version. They must have experience in practicing investigative journalism. The researcher also used the snowball technique to find other potential investigative reporters through their colleague. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using qualitative analysis software, Nvivo. Nodes were established using thematic analysis.

3. Analysis of interviews

Malaysian media practitioners conceptualized investigative journalism through four main themes which are characteristics, information gathering attributes, its purpose and topics covered. The themes were illustrated in Figure 1. All of them agreed that investigative report must be an in-depth report on an issue:

“For investigative report, basically you have to be more in depth or else you won’t support your arguments. You have to go extra miles, spend more time, get the right sources. For normal issue, may be you can just interview one person and write the news but for investigative report, it has to be more work. You need to spend more time and see the sensitivity of the issue, either it is sensitive to the nation. What is the importance of the issue to the nation. Whether there's any importance of it for the benefit of the public.”

(Informant 2)

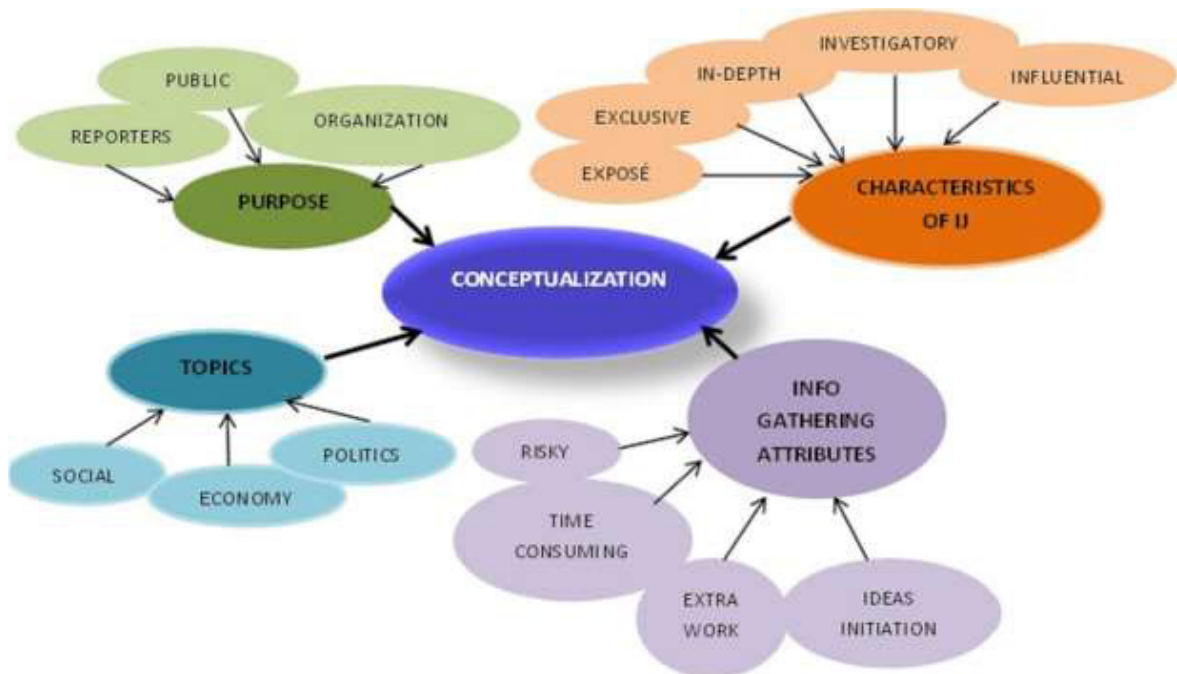


Fig. 1. Conceptualizations of investigative journalism

Informant 2 added that investigative journalism involves a lot of extra work. Investigative reporters must do some research and in-depth study of the issue, get reliable sources and make sure the facts are correct. Their article must be in-depth, not just surface. For informant 5, “an investigative report must provide answers beyond 5W1H in

journalism – What, Where, Who, Which, Why, How. It cannot be just superficial, investigative reporter must get the information from all angles, not just statements and statistics from authorities but also from the victims and they should also expose the reasons behind an issue.” This perception conformed to Yusha’u (2009), Aucoin (2005) and Gaines (1998) who said that investigative journalism take a comprehensive, exhaustive look at issues.

Another popular conceptualization of investigative journalism among informants is that all journalism is investigative. For them, investigation is part and parcel of journalism and it is a very important element in reporting:

“The point is this. Every piece of journalism should be investigative. The investigative part is actually very redundant. Reporters are people who just report what other people say or what they discover but journalist take it further and every journalist must do some kind of investigation if you want to get a good story. Investigative journalism is what makes a newspaper.”

(Informant 9)

Through this conceptualization, reporters assumed their information searching as some kind of investigation because it involves extra work and extra effort. Reporters’ enterprise is very important in gathering, sorting information, building patterns and connecting dots to reveal something of public importance (Aucoin, 2005; Gaines, 1998).

Informants also differentiate investigative journalism in terms of its exclusivity and exposé elements:

“Exclusive means it is our own story, other media don’t have the story. We have to find the issue on our own, not through press conference. Usually exclusive news is 90 per cent investigative because when we got the information, we have to investigate further, go undercover to prove our story.”

(Informant 14)

This elements has not been mentioned directly by any scholars in literature review but they implicate the same direction when they stressed the importance of reporter’s initiative in finding issues and doing the investigation on their own, not reporting of investigations made by authorities (Anderson & Benjaminson, 1976; Greene, 1981; Ullman & Honeyman, 1983; Gaines, 1998; Feldstein, 2006 & Houston, 2010).

Informants also characterize investigative journalism in terms of its influence when compared to normal news. According to informants 10 and 11, the issue could be small but it must have significant impact on the life of the audience. For them, investigative reports have the influence to exert change and only news with high influence is investigative. Protes et al (1991) stressed that this is a sturdier way to differentiate investigative journalism from other kinds of journalism.

Secondly, similar to literature review informants also conceptualized investigative journalism through its information gathering attributes. Informants characterize the process as time consuming, needs extra work and it is very risky. In terms of idea initiation, the American paradigm stressed that it must be done by the reporter and not a report of other people’s investigation. However, Malaysian media practitioners conceptualized differently. They considered reports initiated by their editors or reports of investigation by authorities are investigative reporting, as long as the reporter involve in the information gathering process. Southern American scholar, Waisbord (2000) supported this perception.

In terms of issues covered in investigative journalism, IRE has set a standard where the subject of the story must involve something of reasonable importance to the reader or viewer, and that others are attempting to hide these matters from the public. Informants classified the issues into politics, economy and social. In politics, informants mentioned corruption, abuse of power and government delivery systems as some of their interests. However, out of 16 informants, only four said that they covered political issues. Informant 7, an editor of online news portal admitted that political issue is their niche and selling point because mainstream newspapers are not giving much coverage on this issue. Others are more comfortable with social issues like crime, consumerism and environment. Interestingly, only one informant mentioned about investigating economic issues.

Some scholars defined investigative journalism through its purpose. Scholars like Ettema and Glasser (1988), Protes et al (1991) and Feldstein (2006) emphasized the unique objective of investigative journalism – unearthing wrongdoings that affect public interest – clearly distinguished the conceptualization of investigative journalism from other kinds of journalism. Informants have the same conceptualizations as some of them stressed the importance of investigative journalism as a check and balance of the government and exposing wrongdoings. According to the

informants, general news lack of such impact and influence as they only report daily happenings. On the other hand, investigative journalism reports something with impact that can influence the public awareness and push the authorities to take actions.

Informants also elaborated that practicing investigative journalism will also benefit their organisations. Among others, they said that investigative journalism can help improve their organisation credibility because of the in-depth information and analysis provided to their readers. The element of exclusivity also makes them different when compared to other newspapers. Informants also added that investigative journalism helps increase their sales as readers want to get exclusives and analysis of an issue, not just news. In addition, informants also mentioned that investigative journalism helps increase sales because it reports matters pertinent to public interest. Therefore, they will follow the story and buy the newspaper everyday.

Analysis of interview transcribes also yielded another important purpose of practicing investigative journalism among informants. They believe that investigative journalism has also benefited them in one way or another. Most informants admitted that they felt the satisfaction when they can help the public find solutions for their problem. They also claimed that investigative journalism give them chance to prove their self-worth to their editors.

In summary, the conceptualizations of investigative journalism can be viewed from a few perspectives including practitioners understanding on its characteristics, its info gathering attributes the purpose of practicing investigative journalism and topics covered. Overall, there is no obvious contradiction between informants and scholars conceptualizations. However, there are a few different perspectives offered by informants that connect closely with values and factors influencing their practice.

4. Discussion

Conceptualizations of investigative journalism among Malaysian media practitioners have been deeply influenced by factors and values pertinent to their media environment. Although their general conceptions of investigative journalism aligned with overseas scholars, their practices have been change to suit local media environment. This can be seen from their information gathering attributes and topics they selected to investigate. For Malaysian media practitioners, the ideas initiation and investigation by the reporter is not a compulsory element. They rather emphasized on the societal-relevant results of their reports. This is because they do not have the luxury of Freedom of Information Act (FOI) where they can get access to public document. In Malaysia, getting the information and documents leakage is very hard. Therefore, they have to rely on authorities to supply the information to them.

As a developing nation, Malaysian media is more of a lapdog rather than watchdog of the government. Their priority is always supporting government policy. Due to multiracial citizens, racial and religion sensitivities are taboo topics for Malaysian media. Therefore, informants choose to write more on consumerism, environment and social illness rather than exposing wrongdoing of their leaders.

All in all, Malaysian media practitioners conceptualized investigative journalism as a field with a lot of advantages, not only to the public but also to their organization and themselves. However, their practice is guided by values imbedded in them through press freedom, Malaysian culture and religious teachings, added with factors like media control, media culture and individual passions.

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