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Journalism as National Dialogue Platform: Celebrating the News and Opinion

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Abstract

In a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society, journalism is expected to play a mitigating and stabilizing function. We generally expect balance and objectivity. But what we see and expect to see is couched in Manichean terms – the black and white, binary rendition of the narrative which we nurture and in turn nurtured us. Prejudice is learnt. We need to unlearn prejudice without being apologetic. This paper argues that the Malaysian media should project a national consensus in the form of a ‘Journalism Dialogue.’ The initiative calls for some philosophical reflection on the news and opinion.

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1. Introduction

I am not amused with academics who have a condescending view of journalism and the press. Perhaps I should not expect them to hold journalists and the press in high regard. Or perhaps too, their frame of reference is based on their experiences of newspapers and newsmen. To a few, the press is cheap newsprint, thrash, daily gossip and spin, and as they say, fit for wrapping fish. But then, I do hear academics or the layman expressing the same sentiment about bloggers and online newspapers.

We are indeed influenced by form, and what we have seen. But what is journalism? I have a soft spot for the *suratkhabar* (newspaper), for the hardcopy. It will be around for many years to come despite what the pundits have

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said about it. Why journalism is becoming increasingly insignificant is due to the fetish with which the computer-mediated cyber world has made it for almost everybody to do some bits of reporting or conversations in the name of doing journalism. This liberty through free access through the internet even from corners of our homes has blurred the authorities of ideas and opinions from the professionals. Such freedom has dangerously simplified the complexities of news gathering, packaging and dissemination – news production and interpretation. As such, it is imperative to redefine journalists and journalism.

We need a new journalistic literacy. So back to the question – what is the press? Why should we care about journalism? We routinely consume journalism, and nowadays we produce it too. We experience the world through journalism, through the hardcopy, and more so, through the Internet in its various platforms. We may be addicted to television, blogs, Facebook or online newspapers. But are we all journalists (referring to the fraternity) based on what we see, hear and narrate about ourselves and the world around us? This paper revisits journalism, and continues on the discussion and dialogue about journalism and its ramifications, values and expectations. It further argues that the nation's journalist, and other media should come together and seek to project a national consensus through the process of dialogue. Journalists, editors and newspaper owners must themselves initiate the process of a Journalism Dialogue, lest we want to drift into our own separate worlds in the same nation. Such a move can begin from a certain perspective. And applying some form of philosophical reflection to the core twin activities of journalism – news and opinion, could only improve and provide value to the initiative.

2. Journalism revisited: concept and expression

Journalism is a mode of expression. But journalists themselves seldom talk about their profession. Profession? Some would measure journalism against the professions of law and medicine. Journalism is not a profession in the conventional sense of the word. It is a fraternity. It is a vocation. It is a craft. It is an occupation. It is an ideology. It is a narration. It is an intellectual pursuit. It is not only reporting the news. And it is not only a neutral transmitter of events and ideas. It interprets the world near and far, concrete and abstract. It can be partisan. It is objective. It is impartial. It is ideological (Merican, 2001). Journalism has often been deemed as not worthy as an object of study. To some, it does not deserve to be studied in a university because it is perceived to be hollow of corpus. It is usually seen to be a subject without an epistemology. Journalism has often been conceived, even amongst journalism educators, only as a skill.

It is concept, it is ideational. It is philosophy – much associated with factuality, objectivity, imagination, meaning, creativity, and language. It gathers a privileged status over prose fiction and non-fiction. It is expected to be truthful, and more so adhere to the canon of accuracy. But it must also be conscious that accuracy is not equivalent to truth. It searches for authenticity. At the same time, it delves on repetitiveness.

It is a discourse. It creates space for the intellectual and the intelligentsia. It provides for social and political criticisms. It projects identity and ethnicity. It promotes literacy and the exchange of ideas. Journalism is a cultural form. It is a mode of story-telling. It is 'reality' as reported. It is information – powerful and ubiquitous, fluid and constrained at the same time. It is watch dogging and punditry at its best. News is important. But opinion is more critical. The journalist oscillates between neutral transmitter and participant observer. We see this in Malaysia's reconfigured culture of journalistic practice – full-time journalist and part/fulltime blogger.

3. Intellectuals and scholars

Journalists are writers too. And intellectuals also journalize, devoting part of their energies to journalism in the likes of Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, and Edward Said. And closer to us, Mohandas Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Syed Shaikh Al-Hady, Eunus Abdullah, Ishak Haji Muhammad, and A Samad Ismail. Also scholars who write for the press are those who take it upon themselves to share their ideas, advocate a cause, or project and mitigate a sentiment. The journalistic institution mediates scholarship to the layman. What we have also seen, in the evolution of the press in Malaysia, and especially since beginning the Malay newspaper beginning 1876 is the intellectualization of journalists and journalism.

There is much interchange and interdependence between intellectuals and journalists. They are two sides of the same coin. But one side is dominated by the market where information is produced, customers are canvassed, ethical

codes are abided to. Journalists are intellectuals in their own right. They make meaning everyday. They provide a barometer of the social, political and economic environments. They interpret cultural and ideological codes. Journalism can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. It is not only a practice. It is thought, technology and ideology operationalized to fit in mainly immediate concerns of state and society. It provides space for intellectuals.

In many societies, in the early modern and modern periods, intellectuals play a critical role in creating consciousness and being critical to the workings of society. Intellectuals play the role of social critic. The newspaper engages intellectuals in the advocacy of particular positions. In this sense, it is not only the advocacy and the positions that are important, at the same time it militates the climate and environment necessitating criticism to occur. When this happens, criticisms should not be seen as necessarily subversive to nation and society. In the organic intersection between journalism and intellectual groups, it is the duty of the press to operate within a given social system. Intellectuals must see the press not only as a political organ, but also as social and cultural organs.

4. Activism and empowerment: dialogue, consumption and production

Journalism is also activism, especially in the early years of many a post-colonial state such as India, Indonesia and Malaysia. Journalism extends scholarship. It shares thoughts and ideas with the disempowered and the powerful. By sharing the journalistic platform generates debates and criticisms. Commentaries and reviews are journalistic ingredients. Journalism is a habit, beyond ink and paper, bits and bytes. And engaging in it is a ritual, honest and unapologetic. We celebrate the scribe in all his manifestations.

Take for example, the Bahasa Melayu daily, daily *Utusan Malaysia*. In recent decades, it has been getting attention for the wrong reasons. Over the years, I am associated with the daily and the company *Utusan Melayu* in more ways than one. I was never an *Utusan* journalist, but I was once in the profession. I not only read *Utusan Malaysia*, but I also read the other Bahasa Malaysia-language newspapers and English newspapers, apart from online journalism and blogs from across the political spectrum. My handicap is that I do not read Chinese and Tamil-language newspapers. I do not specifically know what is inside those pages, although I would have some idea based on other sources. But then, the visuals as seen on these newspapers also cast an impression on their social and political orientations. You can say I consume journalism. The institution and profession is a complex one. It is not simply labelling a newspaper seditious or propagandistic. It is not simply a black and white affair. Even if the messenger does not work alone, issues of freedom and integrity may not necessarily be compromised. I have encountered friends and colleagues who simply dismiss the newspaper, proudly pronouncing that they do not read such stuff.

And such comments had come from the affluent middle-class Malays, intellectuals and the intelligentsia, not to mention the Chinese community. I too, on many occasions over almost four decades had my fair share of criticism against *Utusan Malaysia* - beginning with my exposure to journalism studies as a student in the early 1970s, as a journalist in the early 1980s and as a member of the journalism and social science academic fraternity since the mid 1980s. We generally expect a balanced coverage and objectivity on the press. But what we see and expect to see is couched in Manichean terms – even the perception on the few English-language newspapers in Malaysia.

On top of that, the vernacular newspapers have their own biases and their own audience. If we accuse *Utusan Malaysia* of being seditious, look at ourselves and what we have inherited. History and discourse are sources of sedition – some latent, some manifest. We grow in that environment. We nurture such values and it turn being nurtured by the very values that we believe in. Prejudice is learnt. We need to learn on how to unlearn prejudice without being apologetic. The initiative has to be based on honesty and trust. One of the sources of prejudice is the media. Surfing news and commentary online, or picking up the day's newspaper is an act of conscience on how we consume prejudice. What we do not read, or the language that we do not understand, represents another world of discourse with its own concerns and priorities.

We have to return to the source of our prejudice. The newspaper is (only) the messenger. Don't burn it, but build upon it. *Utusan Melayu* (Malaysia) and the major Chinese newspapers in Malaysia have a long history. The periods of the 1920s and 1930s are significant watershed years in defining the nation.

Hence how is journalism to engage in a dialogue among itself? A Dialogue refers to a conversation between two people. What we have in mind are more than just that. We envision a conversation on a subject of common interest

between two or more individuals or parties, whose beliefs are informed by differing worldviews. The ultimate aim of the dialogue is to inculcate an attitude founded on appreciation, understanding, interest and compassion for the cultures and worldviews of the other (Merican, 2010). The science and art of journalism have a role – as a public discourse as well in formal education that facilitate the dialogue. 2001 was the United Nation's Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, but all we saw in the world's media were war and conflict. This situation was conditioned and determined by a multitude of forces, among them, the commodification of news and information, the conceptualization and practice that journalism is a profession (see McQuail, 2013, p. 196-202); Marocco, 2005).

5. Concluding remarks

Newspapers and the media are potential platforms for dialogue. The National Reconciliation Initiative by the Prime Minister must integrate the role of newspapers and other forms of media. The nation's longstanding issue is Sino-Malay relations. We are strangers in the same land. At the same time, principles of power-sharing and coexistence have to continue and be rooted in honesty and trust. Bahasa Melayu and Chinese language newspapers and the journalistic community would go a long way in racial relations in manifesting that trust and honesty. But I am not taking an objective stance for myself by assuming that I am ethnically neutral. Newspapers and journalism, while having their specific set of readers, based on ethnic or socio-economic status, are inherently national. They grew out from some form of indigenous expression. *Utusan Melayu* is such a newspaper if we care to read its history. Under the circumstances, the nation should begin a Journalism dialogue platform. The journalistic fraternity should initiate and play the leading role. One of which is to engage in a Chinese-Malay Journalism Initiative lest we would want to drift into our own separate worlds within the same nation.

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