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On MH370 and Autonomy of Information

By Yow Chong Lee

IT was a poignant encountering for Malaysians when receiving news on the missing flight, MH370 on its way to Beijing last Saturday. It was a week ago. Has the sad feeling ceased? Probably no, as there are many moral guardians who tried to impart humanity among us while, literally, slaying their swords towards those who deviate from the way they want us to be - empathise with the victims and say nothing other than that.

Modernism and MH370

In the age of modernism, science and technology prevail, the belief to any other being whose existence is intangible and unprovable with science will not be accepted. In other words, modernism demands every argument to be proven and pinpointed exactly without flaw or discrepancy. Should any grey area exists; it should be wiped off by the means of continuous "scientific research" since uncertainty can never fit into the framework of modernism.

As does the case of MH370, via a glance on the questions asked in a series of ongoing press conferences, one can observe, the journalists are working their best to provide "accurate" reporting to their mass readers, i.e. "when exactly was the search initiated?", "what are the radius

of our current search?", and "can you please provide us the details of the two stolen passports?". Undoubtedly, these questions stem from our curiosity on the mysterious incident.

However, over days of listening to the live broadcasts, only several diplomatic answers can be found, e.g. "we are contacting our correspondents to verify the source", "we couldn't reveal the details until we can confirm", and "we urge the public to restrain from spreading unverified information". Here it gives rise to the very question on the autonomy of information - who own(s) the information?

Autonomy of Information

Undoubtedly, one can champion the importance of delivering accurate information in order to avoid unnecessary circumstances such as misinformation, social panic and discomfort to the victims' next of kin. Yet, the question asked above is certainly unanswered. Who own(s) the information? Why only particular group of people are eligible to relay information? In what context, the information is deemed accurate? In other words, these questions are asked as a challenge towards the very autonomy of information which was a norm during Medieval period, when the elite groups such as aristocrats and religious authority hold the only rights to deliver messages and information to their people.

From Medieval Period to Postmodernism

Should one forget about the age of internet, where everyone lives in the virtual world of instant information sharing, s/he might probably be ignorant with the fact that internet has proffered us the sentiment of (pseudo) freedom of expression. A big number of us are attempting to prove her/himself by sharing instantaneous, but not necessary verified information. In other words, this is, if you like, the "trend" of our contemporary society. It also brings us to the idea of postmodernism (in the context of social science) - there is no ultimate truth as it is only the process of (truth) seeking, not the result (destination), that counts.

Media organisations, as well as every one of us, should never deny the existence of grey areas where information, arguments, identities and many more can appear in the form of uncertainty. You and I will have hard time, if not impossible, to articulate the ultimate truth of every information, arguments and identities. Just to make thing fun, can you define yourself (pinpoint your identity) exactly without flaw? In the view of postmodernists, no one can ever do that. Hence, no one should pretend to be the ultimate provider of information, so do the case of our media with its proud claim of being the trustworthy information provider.

Lastly, let's keep our hope burning while coming to terms with the idea of postmodernism.

Yow Chong Lee is currently teaching in a local university. He keeps reminding himself, "may us be equipped with serenity in encountering things that we can't change, be courageous enough to change things that we can make a difference, and filled with wisdom to differentiate the two." #prayformh370