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Commentary

Teaching 'best practices' of journalism in Malaysia



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Journalism has over the years invited distrust, scorn, cynicism, even sheer revulsion, from the general public. This is especially so with fraudulent reporting on the rise, such as the one committed by *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair in 2003. Investigative journalism of the 'Watergate' type seems to have faded to the extent that it would take concerted effort by journalism educators to 'excite' students into taking up journalism as a career.

In Malaysia, journalism ethics, standards and credibility have long been compromised at the altar of political expediency and corporate interests particularly within sections of the mainstream media. This situation is aggravated by the fact that the media are also controlled by the state through illiberal laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), Official Secrets Act (OSA), Sedition Act, Communications and Multimedia Act, and the Internal Security Act (ISA).

Set against this political backdrop, it is hardly surprising that the teaching (and learning) of journalism in Malaysian universities can be disheartening – and challenging at the same time. Apart from the PPPA, OSA, Sedition Act, and the ISA impinging on press freedom, journalism educators and students are also restricted by the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) and the *Aku Janji* (Oath of Allegiance [to the government of the day]).

The UUCA prohibits academic staff and students from being involved in political activism. This mechanism of control is placed at the disposal of university authorities. Under the UUCA, a number of universities had taken disciplinary action against students for being involved in activities deemed 'undesirable', such as publicly criticising procedures or policies of the university authorities, or student protests against social injustice such as the perpetuation of the Internal Security Act (ISA) that permits indefinite detention without trial. The UUCA (and also the *Aku Janji*) practically serves as an additional layer of control vis-à-vis the other laws over open critical political discourse among academic staff and students.

This partly explains the disposition of my journalism students. When asked in a class survey why they opted for journalism as a field of study, many gave answers that invariably besmirched journalism as a profession. A few said they chose journalism because they saw it as a stepping stone to what were considered as a better status in life, such as working as a public relations executive, or a press secretary to a minister. Some perceived journalism to be a profession that promises 'glamour' especially in entertainment media. The majority considered journalism as a transient stop before they move on to 'bigger and better things'. Others perceived journalism as providing opportunities to 'meet all kinds of people who matter'. Few students selected journalism for its public service functions, for instance, to help make a meaningful change in Malaysian society. The student feedback underlines the imperative for educators to teach not only the 'how' but the 'why' of journalism.

Some of my students, especially after their return from practical training in the media industry, often expressed, understandably, their disillusion and frustration with mainstream media. They claimed that they could not apply in the newsroom what they had learnt in class, such as critical and investigative reporting, because many editors would edit, if not spike, their stories to the point of making their news reports appear politically bland. They were also at times accused by some media practitioners of being 'too idealistic' and 'less pragmatic'. The tendency of certain editors to exercise censorship over the news reports of the students concerned is very much related to the culture of self-censorship that has been developed over the years as a result of restrictive media laws as the PPPA. This phenomenon highlights the need for journalism educators to develop a journalism curriculum that would equip students with the conceptual, philosophical and professional skills so that they could make a difference in the mainstream newsroom when they enter the profession.

The students' responses point to an underlying public discontent with the profession since late 1998 when the Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was unceremoniously dismissed by the Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamed. It was then that the mainstream media displayed their subservience to the government in their coverage of the sacking. This led to widespread *Reformasi* street protests. The biased reportage of the protests and Anwar's arrest often bordered on the unethical, the scandalous, and the mischievous (Mustafa, 2000: 108-110; *Malaysian Media Monitors' Diary*). The media and journalists' credibility reached an all-time low in that period.

Additionally, the credibility of the Malaysian media took another nosedive when a Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (or BERSIH), which is made up of civil society groups and Opposition parties, organized a massive rally in Kuala Lumpur on November 10, 2007. The peaceful street demonstration, which attracted the participation of more than 40,000 people, was staged to mainly push for electoral reforms. Forewarned by the government, the compliant mainstream media, however, downplayed, if at all covered, this politically important incident since the *Reformasi* protests erupted in the late 1998. Most of the media reports framed the massive rally as an incident that caused traffic snarls on a Saturday weekend, and an unnecessary inconvenience to the general public. Detailed accounts and updates of the incident were dutifully recorded and publicized by blogs and websites that are generally critical of the state.

The covered mainstream media reportage of the BERSIH protest shows the imperative for journalism educators to impress upon students the political and social

significance of critical investigative journalism in creating an informed citizenry to ensure proper accountability from the government and its affiliated business corporations.

A recent survey conducted by the polling outfit, Merdeka Centre, revealed that six out of 10 Malaysians distrust the Malaysian mainstream media, which again suggests the problem of credibility gap among the media in the country. It appears that the media situation has become such a deep concern for the government that it provoked no less than current Prime Minister Najib Razak to tell Malaysians on Sept. 2, 2010 “to trust the mainstream media and not the alternative media which are based on half truths” (<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/trust-the-mainstream-media-urges-najib/>).

Indeed, the contemporary status of media freedom in Malaysia does not augur well for students as well as journalists. In recent past, warnings were issued and even drastic actions were taken by the Home Ministry against the top management of newspapers and magazines. One instance is the case of political cartoonist Zunar who has had run-ins with the authorities because his comic magazines incurred the wrath of the powers-that-be. The latest incident was the case of the editor of the Chinese-language *Special Weekly*, Joseph Yeow, who was immediately demoted by the publisher to the position of an ordinary staff of the magazine after he published certain materials, including a cartoon, that were critical of the government. The Home Ministry took exception to such content in the latest issue of the weekly as reported in the *Merdeka Review* on Aug.20, 2010 (<http://merdekareview.com/bm/news.php?n=11033>).

Journalists operating in conditions of social inequality have a vital part to play to help the ordinary people seek and secure social justice. This, journalists could do by providing the concerned individuals and groups with the necessary information to raise their political awareness, thus enabling them to express their views on concerns that affect their daily lives.

Students should indeed be educated to exercise a form of reporting that advocates for the ordinary people. As a journalism educator in the Malaysian academic and media environment, it's a challenge to draw the line between 'objective' detached journalism and advocacy journalism. I am proposing that in a world of social injustice, greater concern and compassion must prevail when journalists deal with issues associated with the poor and the trampled. Under such circumstance, if there's a potential to err, journalists should err on the side of social justice. In other words, in a world of injustice, to be neutral or 'objective' is to side with injustice. Besides, this advocacy approach is aimed at addressing the currently lopsided media system in Malaysia.

In my class, students are constantly reminded of the importance of having a critical understanding of Malaysian society, the politics of ethnicity, the current status of civil and political liberties, important government policies and legislations, the make-up of the media industry, and unresolved issues of press freedom. This liberal studies approach ensures that my journalism students are able to ask pertinent and informed critical questions in their role as journalists in the Malaysian media environment.

In terms of class activities, students are required to critique news reports and features published in national newspapers in terms of 'news values' and significance to

addressing current social issues. They are also required to suggest questions that were not raised in the selected news items, and to provide justification for those suggestions.

Equally necessary is that students of journalism need to understand 'how journalism participates in the production and circulation of meaning in our society' (Skinner, Gasher and Compton 2001: 342). Only when students are fully aware that they are embedded in an ideological mechanism that attempts to represent society would they be able to fully appreciate the political and social implications of journalism. Here, not only is it important for students to know who they write about, but also how the people they write about are depicted in their news reports in the way that certain words, photographs and headlines are used and structured. Such portrayal is invariably the product of interactions between the journalists (who have their own political, social and cultural preferences) on one hand and certain social institutions and social actors on the other. This approach would help to systematically bridge the gap between theory and practice in journalism.

In a restrictive environment such as in Malaysian campuses, both teachers and students need to explore possibilities of 'creative' critical journalism. For example, certain ideas that may be considered 'sensitive' or 'controversial' by the state could be published in a student laboratory newspaper via critical reviews of selected books, films, music and plays, and other forms of popular culture. Although there were few successful attempts by officials at the university, where I teach, to ban or censor such critical reviews from being published in the newspaper, this doesn't necessarily mean that such endeavour ought to be abandoned.

Post-mortem of the laboratory newspaper is a useful platform where one can make news production and journalism 'alive' and exciting, and at the same time instructive. For instance, in a news report about contract labour employed in the construction of new buildings on the Universiti Sains Malaysia campus, issues of migrant and cheap labour, work safety, labour unionism, and potential human exploitation, among others, were raised and discussed critically. Here, what were examined were not only the various aspects of professional journalism but the whole gamut about contract labour on campus in particular, and the country in general. This extended to the coverage of human rights issues.

Journalism that considers the fundamentals of professional journalism and the various aspects of society would constitute one of the best practices of journalism. My journalism students had not only spoken with the contract labourers but also their employers, university officials, labour relations officials, and labour laws as well. In other words, the students were conscientious enough to ensure that their reporting was as fair and as accurate as possible given the administrative constraints on campus.

To reiterate, a good grasp of the society in which the journalist operates is crucial, particularly in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies such as Malaysia where conflicts emerge from time to time in varying degrees. Armed with such knowledge and comprehension, the journalist would be in a better position to do a comprehensive coverage of issues so that readers and citizens of the country would have deep understanding of the issues at hand.

Additionally, such an informed journalist could practise what is called peace journalism, or conflict-sensitive journalism, where sensationalist elements of physical

violence, gore, killing and blood are de-emphasized; instead, the context and causes of conflict are highlighted to foster better understanding among the locals, particularly non-state actors in a particular conflict. This kind of journalism also provides adequate space to highlight the good work of the ordinary people in building bridges in conflict areas of society, especially after the outbreak of a conflict. 'Peace journalism' has, and should, become more pertinent and important given the increasing occurrences of ethno-religious-related incidents in recent years in Malaysia.

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