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Asian Values In Journalism:
Is There Such A Thing?

By

Melinda Quintos De Jesus
"ASIAN VALUES IN JOURNALISM -- IS THERE SUCH A THING?"

CONFERENCE PAPER

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INTRODUCTION:

The question suggests an open mind about the premise of our discussion. Asian leaders often refer to Asian values in their speeches and writings, perhaps in an attempt to explain their national situation, whether in the context of the media or other issues, such as human rights. The question for this panel locates Asian values in the profession of journalism, recognizing "the mass media as agents of change." In practice and principle, journalism as a form of mass communication is in touch with values. Are these values then identifiable with way journalists work all over Asia?

According to the dictionary, values may be interpreted as qualities regarded as "desirable, useful, estimable or important." Values may also be interpreted as principles reflected in the conduct and practice of a group or a community, or in national way of life. It certainly applies to professional practice. Professional codes of conduct demonstrate such commonly shared standards of performance. In journalism, performance has to do with gathering and delivering of the news.

To refer to Asian values in journalism presumes a shared value system for journalists in Asian countries. It presumes also a difference from the shared value system holding for the countries of the West, that is, Europe and the Americas.
Values Reflected in Press Systems

News coverage, in its substance and style, reveal values of society. Journalism is a practical activity pursued in the real world of human society. The practice of journalism comes to terms with the political and social systems of a larger community or society. To examine journalistic practice in a country is to discover also the character of its political system.

Authoritarian governments set the limits of journalistic activity with values that observe the primacy of the state administration. Thus one classical theory of journalism ranks government as a higher force than the individual in the scale of social values. In such a system, government censorship or regulatory legislation allows government to directly supervise the gathering and dissemination of the news. In its extreme, the practice allows government domination of the press so it can serve primarily as a medium of official statements or as a tool of propaganda.

In contrast, liberal democratic systems place the individual above the state. The system nurtures a press free of government control. The market of ideas allows a fair exchange in a public forum. Theoretically, anyone can participate in journalism. In practice, anyone can practice journalism who can get himself hired for the job or who can finance the operations of a news organization. In such a system, government must compete with other forces and institutions for the projection of its views in the public forum.
In theory and practice, these two dominant theories of journalism evolve permutations. The libertarian system may invoke the values of “social responsibility” which “modifies the laissez-faire posture of the libertarian press.” The theory of social responsibility requires the press to provide for the truthful account of the day’s events and for the free exchange of comments and criticism in the public forum. The authoritarian system need not use strict censorship for so long as the press observes limitations imposed by national security, national harmony or unity. Whether libertarian or authoritarian, a government may call on the press to play a role in the pursuit of national development goals.

The socio-political landscape in Asia has been home for authoritarian, libertarian systems as well as their modifications. The countries in Asia have evolved their press systems according to need, officially enforced or forged by a freely achieved national consensus. The Asian political experience has hardly been monolithic and countries of Asia have favored one system or another, according to the currents of the political season.

Socio-Cultural Values Reflected in the Press

Another path of discussion analyzes societal values reflected in the news. The news results from editorial selection, a filtering process indicative of certain biases and views. One will find in Asian journalism the mirror of the great Asian traditions which
can be found in several countries in the region. What are these shared traditions? It is useful to examine how the religions and the religious philosophies of Asia -- Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Tao-ism -- shape custom and mores of people of the faith. Insofar as these customs and mores shape the political and government systems of the different countries, even political news can sometimes hold a mirror to the spiritual sources of the national community.

The religious issue is one more factor which justifies the description of the Philippines as the most West-oriented of Asian countries -- with more than 90% of Filipinos listing their religion as Roman Catholic or Christian, both religious streams originating in wellsprings of the West.

In this context, the Asian landscape reveal again a diversity rather than a unity, as the peoples of Asia have found faith in different religions of both East and West. At the same time, a growing secularization has also fundamentally affected the strength of traditional religions as a force in Asian societies. Perhaps, in response to the threat of secularism, major religions of both East and West have seen also the rise of religious fundamentalism and the return to the basics of these philosophies.

What about the much flaunted socio-cultural feature of the dominance of the family in the Asian scheme of things? Singaporean leader Lee Kuan Yew cites this fundamental difference of Asian societies from those of the West "...Eastern societies believe that the individual exists in the context of his family. He is not pristine and separate. The family is part of the extended family, and then friends and the wider society."
Indeed, the family remains a basic fundamental force in Asian societies and a central issue in the Asian view, whether in political, social, religious or cultural reflections. The primacy of family connections seems to operate with stronger force in the national cultures of Asia than these do in Europe or the Americas. The web of family relationships extends to the clan, relying on the values of filial piety and reverence as well as fraternal loyalties to sustain extensive networks of mutual support.

Is the family orientation the common denominator which unifies the countries of Asia and defines a collective culture apart from the West? Does the family provide the shared experience and values which bring Asians together in mutual understanding? Are the family values and traditions, the set of obligations and benefits, for example, the common reference for Asians of whatever nationality?

Further, are the economic models in Asia reflective of Asian family values, distinguishing them from those of the West? Do the political systems benefit or suffer from the family orientation? Is the success of some Asian leaders due to their ability to incorporate the family values or orientation into the national political culture, evolving a scheme of development which projects the nation and government as part of the family way of doing things?

It is not the purpose of the paper to prove that this might be so. I am more inclined to question "How long will this be so?" Given the course of rapid economic development, with the forces of urbanization and industrialization changing the face of Asia, how long
will the Asian family hold its own against the same pressures which broke down the family values of the West?

The most industrialized Asian country, Japan, records the significant impact of its development on traditional family orientation. In recent presidential campaigns in the US, the theme of family values has been heard, rising from their desire for a return to what used to be in their society. The sense of loss so poignantly expressed suggests that Asia's view of the family's importance is hardly unique to Asians.

Values as Objects of Aspiration

It may also be useful to examine the goals of development to which national communities aspire. In the view of significant sectors of society, the press must play a role in the projection of these aspirations, to facilitate their acceptance by the masses and the corresponding public action that will achieve these goals.

In certain countries, freedom may seem a dominant issue of development. In others, the goals of multiracial harmony and political stability exude a stronger force. In almost all, surely, there are national projections for economic development which will mean a better quality of life for greater numbers, for equitable distribution of goods, for development that will sustain the environment for coming generations.

But the manner in which journalism plays a role to promote these values differs from country to country, and from system to system. Where government plays a dominant role, certain agencies will guide the press to fulfill their mandate. Where the free market
operates, journalists will be guided by a range of political and social imperatives to scrutinize the official development agenda or to support it, through its editorial policies.

Development Values in Journalism

In Asia, journalism must respond to the surge of value aspiration rising from underdevelopment. Journalistic communication must be in touch with the pressures for rapid economic development: the mass aspiration for labor with dignity, for livelihood that satisfies more than just physical hunger, for the opportunities that will give their children a better future, more health, more wealth.

Asia is the home of countries where these aspirations remain unfulfilled, where governments are mired in the struggle to make these dreams a reality. But with varying stages of development, national perspectives differ from country to country. Because a number have successfully industrialized their economies, the range of development goals differ substantially. Some are barely balancing their national budgets. Others are worrying about improving their competitive edge.

But there is substantial uniformity among the countries grappling with the problems of economic growth. Here development schemes may include crafting new standards for a more progressive journalism in touch with the gravest public needs. I will refrain from using the term development journalism or the New World Information Order because these had been muddled in controversy. But these terms are about the same fundamental dissatisfaction with certain aspects of journalism as practiced in the West.
Among the criticisms: The dominance of global news organizations diminish the importance of the news from Asia. The commercialism of the media tend to ignore the news of marginalized sectors such as the peasant and fisherfolk, women and children. The focus on establishment news sustain the existing imbalance between the ruling political class and the rest of society.

In fact, media critics and communications scholars of the West have been as vocal about their dissatisfaction over the media practice in their countries, noting the growing irrelevance of the news criteria which emphasize only the dramatic events and conflicts, the sensationalized treatment of news.

The world has become smaller but also more complex. The news reflect the complexity of issues and the urgency with which they confront nations and societies of the world. How resolve the competing and conflicting ideals of economic growth and environmentalism, for example. Or how to balance national imperatives with the realities of a global market.

But the training of journalists hold them to the values of popular story-telling, with the simple facts laid out in skeletal story plot, following the quotes, “he-said, she-said.” Space is limited. Time in news programs are limited. But everyone pretends that the public has been sufficiently informed.

It is not surprising then that criticism of current media practice is as vigilant in the West where centers have been established to examine and to study the impact of news coverage on public affairs, on political styles as well as policy-formation.)
A press system that is more attuned to the people’s actual needs for useful information will carry different kinds of “news” than one oriented to selling news as entertainment or an instrument of consumerism. Journalists would be in closer contact with marginalized sectors, become just as familiar with the issues of the poor as they are with issues of those in power. The kind of news resulting from such an orientation need not be parochial or limited in its scope. Rather, the news agenda should attempt to link communities of the world who share the same kinds of problems and who are looking for news ways of solving them. These kinds of news will alert human communities to impending crisis by reporting not only on events but also on change in process. These kinds of news will project those themes which indicate the common humanity that characterizes different societies all over the world.

Values of Journalism

But I think the critical question must be raised. Can we always merge journalistic values and national values without weakening one or the other. Various texts list the standards of journalistic coverage and inquiry: accuracy, fairness, balance, completeness or context and perspective, as well as timeliness. As for the aspect of public service, newspapers must provide the kind of information as well as the public dialogue or conversation that responsible citizens need to be able to fulfill their duties, as leaders or as active members of the community.
But the larger context serves the need of historical truth. Journalism provides a record of events that can be preserved and consulted. Journalism tells future generations about how things were in time. In the interest of truth-telling, this recording or collective journal keeping must have credibility and integrity. In my view, it would have to be produced by men and women who wish only to seek out the facts so these can speak the truth, as a great newspaper’s motto describes, without fear or favor.

These are questions which journalists of both East and West must grapple with at certain points of their history and they sometimes have to resolve them, at great risk to themselves as professionals and citizens or with anguish, given the possible clash between national guidelines and journalistic canon, or between competing interests in the common weal.

The Asian Reality in the News: Asia through Asia’s Eyes

In all the different categories probed albeit too briefly in this paper, the evidence does not favor my positive answer to the question. Which is not to deny difference between East and West. The point is, there are also enough differences to set apart Asians from other Asians.

A. Kadir Jasin, group editor of the New Straits Times, pointed out as much during the conference on “Asian Values and the Role of Media” sponsored by Freedom Forum
Asian Center in Hongkong last December, "I think many of the Asian values are in fact universal values as they are adapted and practiced by Asians. There is no homogeneity in the practice of values among Asian countries. There can never be truly Asian values, bearing in mind that we are talking of billions of people scattered over a huge land mass. We can't expect all Asians to have common values."

Where do we go from here?

There should be a continuing attempt to project the diverse aspects of Asian experience, Asian culture, arts, the superlative models of Asian economic growth, the successful strides toward democracy in several countries in Asia, the different media cultures and communication systems that proliferate on Asian soil.

We have complained enough I think about the domination of the Western media over the global scene and the resulting distortions from which almost every other country has suffered, not the least would be the US.

It is time for Asians to get together and cobble an Asian or even an ASEAN cable news network to do this collective job. Participating news organizations from different countries can take on assigned time-slots to project their home-grown news, their indigenous commentary and features about the issues and events of their country. It would be a way for Asians to tell each other and the rest of the world about themselves. It would be an act of sharing that feeds the global soil for greater international understanding.
As I am a guest in this country, I would like to end with a quotation of Malaysian leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, whom my Center hosted as a speaker in a forum in the media in the Philippines. He said in Hongkong, speaking at the same conference previously cited, "If we in Asia want to speak credibly of Asian values, we too must be prepared to champion those ideals which are universal and which belong to humanity as a whole."[6]

He also said, "Asia will continue to modernize, even at an accelerated pace, but it does not mean that she will have to compromise her values an forsake her ideals. However, she needs to be able to give a better account of herself. This conference might just be the perfect forum."[7]

Let this be another beginning as we clarify what values do hold for ourselves as Asians. Diverse as we are, the plurality does not deny the fact of geography and the unifying forces that can grow from a collective terrain.
ENDNOTES


OTHER BIBLIOGRAPHY
