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Theory And Practice:
Finding Common Ground In Asian Journalism

By

Barry Lowe
THEORY AND PRACTICE - FINDING COMMON GROUND IN ASIAN JOURNALISM

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Journalism in Asia represents many diverse approaches to the task of informing and entertaining public audiences located in a broad range of cultures and traditions. The search for core values in the practice of journalism in the Asian region must therefore be framed by very general concepts of the role of the news media in the historic, social and political contexts of these societies. Past explorations of this issue have tended to pivot on a functional view of the news media and have applied models or theories of the media against research into media practice in a particular country to determine which of those models or theories are illustrated by that country. This paper will look at the issue from a normative perspective that attempts to identify broad commonalities in approaches to news production and reception. It will seek to answer the question: what are the unifying elements of journalism practice in Asia that transcend differences in national ideology and culture; how do journalists serve universal needs for public discourse as well as national communication objectives?

Theories and Models

Since the Fifties, Western media theorists - particularly the Americans - have sought to devise formulas to define and categorize news media systems as they operated in different societies. These formulas have tended to imply a value judgment by placing each model in an evolutionary hierarchy. The Western liberal-pluralist models were ranked higher on that evolutionary scale as being more advanced or developed. Those models that applied mostly to non-Western countries were described as less developed, even inferior. The classic formula is the Four Theories of the Press devised by Siebert, Peterson & Schramm (1956). This particular typology rates national media systems in terms of their relationship with the state and society according to whether the prevailing practice of media production and dissemination is framed by one of four sets of philosophical principles: authoritarian, communist, libertarian, or social responsibility. Under this formula the social responsibility model is presented as being something close to the ideal because it imposes moral and ethical limitations over a libertarian framework. The formula tended to consign non-western media systems to the inferior status of being either authoritarian or communist models.

The "four theories" has been persistently criticised for the narrowness and inflexibility of its categorization and its inability to embrace the diversity of media practice, particularly in the developing world. Many theorists have sought to improve on that model, but have usually done so only superficially, by splitting categories or adding supplementary ones. A recent example is that formulated by Lowenstein and Merrill (1990) which takes a two-tiered approach by looking separately at media ownership and the philosophies governing media practice. Their models of media philosophies extend the Siebert et al formula by splitting the social responsibility category into two - social-libertarian and social-centralist - and redefining
the communist category as social-authoritarian.

Development Communication

A fifth theory of the media was developed in the seventies, partly as a reaction to the First World bias of the existing models and the inappropriateness of those models to Third World realities. Its origins were linked to the activities of a United Nations Education Science and Culture Organisation (UNESCO) commission into international communication issues and the formulation of a communication manifesto for the developing world called the New World Information and Communication Order. This model introduced the concept of Development Communication, which describes a philosophy of media practice emphasising the transformational potential of mass communication: that media institutions have a primary responsibility to aid and promote development in their societies. This theory, as described by Hachten (1987), is predicated on the idea of a strategic alliance between state institutions and media organisations to pursue national objectives for the betterment of society. Some Western media theorists have responded to the articulation of this theory by dismissing it as an attempt to rationalise authoritarian approaches to media practice by justifying such policies in the national interest.

This hostile response has fuelled an active debate - often framed in sharply political terms - over the development communication model as an acceptable model for mass media systems. Against the charge that the model supports an authoritarian philosophy and is therefore regressive, is the counter argument that it matches the needs of developing societies for collaborative information strategies and that it also offers a line of resistance against the new imperialism of the Western information systems. With the debate taking on the overtones of a North-South stand-off, intellectuals and political leaders in developing countries have insisted on their right to support media policies appropriate to their social, cultural, economic and political contexts, rejecting First World attempts to impose inappropriate standards on their societies. The positive side of this is that it has stimulated much in the way of quality research work by Asian academics into the attributes and influences of mass media conventions and organisations in their own societies.

The Politics of Values

Values is a term that is often heard in the context of this debate. The Western liberal-pluralists argue that the core values of the ideal media system should be values connected with the word 'freedom' - freedom of expression, freedom from restriction, freedom to criticise governing institutions, freedom of access to information, etc - and values connected with the word 'right' - the public's right to know, citizen's rights, the rights of the individual, the right to operate in a free marketplace of ideas, and so on.

Advocates of development communication usually cite a different set of values: responsibility, basic needs, human development, morality, cohesion, social transformation, cultural integrity, etc. The two sets of values are not necessarily mutually exclusive, although sometimes people on both sides of the debate have inferred they are. In fact the two sides are talking about different issues. The politicisation of this debate seems to have led to this situation where the two arguments are on different levels, almost in different languages.
One result of this dispute is that non-western media theorists are sometimes placed in a defensive position where they feel the need to stress the differences between their societies and the West to argue for the validity of different mass media strategies. And it is very obvious that these differences exist, in what must be the world's most heterogeneous continent. A browse through a pile of regional newspapers and a survey of some Asian TV news bulletins demonstrates the profound differences in cultural attitudes towards the use of information. These mass media products express very directly the cultural values of their societies.

The Journalist as Storyteller

But at the same time - despite the different use of language, of narrative structures, of images, of presentation; despite the different news agenda and issue priorities - there is a remarkable uniformity in these news media products. This uniformity occurs on the superstructural level of what these products provide for their audiences. They are all cultural products that tell the stories of their societies. As such they form a serial discourse on their societies' interaction with their living environments. They are all produced by craftsmen and women whose role it is to tell the stories of their communities and thus aid their communities in their common need to derive meaning from the events and conditions of their lives. Journalists from Iran to Japan are all storytellers, and it is in this fundamental role that we can best find the core values that transcend the differences of journalistic practice within different cultural boundaries.

To talk about journalism as the craft of the storyteller is not only to simplify and crystallise the definition of its function in the modern age but it is also to elevate it to a higher plane. It is a "top down" view of journalism that starts with the universal attributes of the craft and looks down on the immense variety of forms that the craft takes as it is practised in different societies. That leading Frankfurt School theorist on the media and popular culture, Walter Benjamin (1979), placed strong emphasis on the role of the storyteller as a universal cultural institution and how that institution remained salient in the age of the mechanical reproduction of culture. The concept of the journalist as storyteller is based on an historical view of this cultural institution that begins long before mass media technologies created the profession of journalists. Pre-literate human societies all had their storytellers to pass on the folklore, the myths, the traditions to successive generations. These cultural agents entertained and informed the community by using the ritual of the fireside narration as a window to understanding of the environmental forces and common experiences that shaped that community's destiny. The traditional storyteller still exists in some communities. In this region, for example, the T'boli people of Lake Sebu in Mindanao gather for an annual recitation of their foundation epic - the Tudbalog - which is recited by an old woman of the community who spent a decades long apprenticeship of committing to memory the long story of heroic feats and mythical events. That tradition also lives on in nearly all cultures in which children are told folktales at bedtime.

The storyteller of pre-history evolved into modern forms and the craft became shaped by technology. Today the chief storytellers of the industrial age are men and women who fashion their tales into products for newspaper columns and transmission by satellite. These products contain more factual information than those of their pre-literate predecessors, but they are still products that seek to fulfill their society's need for an interpretation of events and experience and products that embrace individuals in a common strategy for understanding the forces that shape their lives.
The Bonds of Tradition

As a working journalist I often felt this. It was a self-concept linking me to the millennium-old tradition of the storyteller that I experienced as a sense of solidarity with other journalists from other cultures. It was clear to me that we all did the same thing, we all interpreted events and crafted our interpretations into stories. Our stories were different because we were speaking to different audiences and we took into account the different expectations of our audiences that were determined by their different cultural contexts, contexts such as different languages. But we still did the same job, we all told the stories of our time.

I have felt this sense of common purpose with journalists from other cultures on many occasions during my career. I experienced that bond of unity with the Philippine journalists covering EDSA revolution as it toppled one of this region's most notorious dictatorships in 1986. We worked together to tell the same story, although obviously that story had a very different resonance for their audience compared to mine. More recently, I experienced an almost spiritual feeling of common purpose while working alongside Croatian journalists covering the bloody rebirth of their nation in 1991. Again, the story had a very different salience in their marketplace than it did in mine.

I have found that journalists from different countries generally show an ability to relate to each other. They seem to speak the same language. They often assist and advise each other. They often work collaboratively. It is one of the joys of the profession. This tendency may seem surprising if you consider how different are the rules that they work under, how each country's media industry sets very different standards, conventions and restraints. But it is not surprising if you consider the universal role of cultural agent that unites them.

News and Ideology

Some schools in the critical tradition of media theory - see, for example, Windschuttle (1988) - challenge this concept of the journalist as storyteller by arguing the journalist's story is just a vehicle for ideology that supports the existing social order. News production in the age of mass communication is a hegemonic function controlled by and in support of the ruling elites. The stories told by the media are scripts of control embedded with messages of persuasion. Without confronting this theoretical position - in some authoritarian societies it clearly has application - I would argue instead that news stories have an essential role in cultural reproduction that underlies their purpose regardless of the political or ideological climate. Audiences derive meaning from news stories according to cultural cues and markers that often subvert preferred meanings. For example, propaganda by a totalitarian government may tell the story of the citizen's relationship with his or her rulers, rather than the story its authors intended it to tell. News reception can be a site of resistant against ideologies, which is perhaps where the tradition of shooting the messenger began.

Critical theorists might also challenge my argument by pointing out that the institution of the storyteller can also be an elitist one, that the storyteller may represent ruling class interests or dominant gender interests and that the ideology of a society can be strongly influenced by those who tell that societies' stories. Cultural agents occupy positions of power in their societies.
Understanding the source and manifestation of that power is essential to understanding the relationship between cultural producers and their audiences. Again, I would not confront this position but only point out that societies (or their ruling elites) make their own rules about their cultural institutions. Storytellers are still storytellers regardless of the guidelines imposed on them and the prevailing political conditions of their relationship with their audience.

Tragedy is Always Tragedy

There has not been a large amount of comparative cross-cultural research into news production that explores this idea of the storytelling essence of journalism. One study, relevant to this discussion, was done by my colleagues at the City University of Hong Kong - Li et al (1993) - comparing the coverage of a major news event in Hong Kong's English and Chinese media (press, radio and TV). The study looked at the coverage of a major accident in Hong Kong on New Year's Day 1993 in which 20 people died when a crowd of revellers stampeded. The study found many points of comparison in the narrative strategies used by the Chinese and English journalists and a divergence over the central issue of the story (the high death toll, how could it have happened, who is to blame). The were graphic differences in style. The emotive "weight" carried by the Chinese stories seemed greater than in the English accounts. Yet all versions contained the same essential elements. All had the same basic facts, all expressed the horror of the situation, all recorded the victims' and survivors' plight, all demanded appropriate action from the authorities, all predicted the community's outraged response. All told the same story, using different frames of cultural reference. All displayed the same core values of the journalists' role to tell the story of this tragedy to their own communities.

Same Story Different Voices

Research into the history of journalism in Asia has tended to focus on the colonial experience and the media's response and contribution to nationalist struggles. Few of these studies have attempted to link the news media to the cultural institutions that preceded them. Their evolution as institutions of nation building has been generally emphasised over their role in connecting cultural traditions of the pre-colonial era with those of the modern era. This has tended to create the impression that media institutions are mirrors of their society's cultures, including the political and social parameters of those cultures, rather than cultural agents in their own right that emerged from the wellsprings of their communities.

This, to me, seems fundamental to this discussion about Asian Values in journalism. For millennia the storyteller has played a role in Asian societies by informing those societies about their own beliefs and values and by providing a focus for collective experience. journalists do that today in those same societies. These journalists speak with different voices, they employ different conventions and they operate within different cultural frames of reference, but they still cater to that fundamental human need for a vehicle for communal self-reflection.

I am suggesting that we can start from this view of journalism as the modern era's institution of the storyteller ... a universal concept that places the news media in the realm of normative cultural practice common to all societies. From this perspective we can begin constructing the
edifice that describes the social role of journalism in this region by building a framework of 
communication theory on a foundation of Asian cultural values. At least this approach is not 
premised on the notion that Asian societies developed their media practice models largely from 
exposure to western examples, and through their colonial experience. Asian media practice 
comes from the same tradition of the storyteller that has been universal to human society 
since our common ancestors first invented language in a remote era when there may not 
have even been different human races.

Conclusion

To return to the two questions I posed at the start of this paper - what are the unifying 
elements of journalism in Asia and how do the region's journalists serve universal needs as 
well as national objectives - I believe the answer lies in the concept of the storyteller I have 
described. Each society has different stories it wants told, or the same stories told in different 
ways. So each society has need of the same cultural agents to fulfill this role. The particular 
branch of storytelling called journalism (other branches include poetry, novels, drama, painting, 
dance, music and history) is today playing a prominent part in the development of the 
changing societies of this region.

Journalists work to specific objectives but according to universal traditions. They observe, 
they question, they doubt, they interpret, they react, they write, they speak and they 
communicate. They bridge two worlds: the world of experience and the world of the 
collective memory of that experience. They operate in the public realm of their society's 
history-making processes. But those processes are different in each society and journalists 
match their products to the boundaries set by those processes, taking their cues from their own 
cultures. In examining this question of Asian values in journalism I think a productive line of 
inquiry will come from starting out with this view of the journalist as the universal storyteller, then 
focusing our research gaze onto particular culturally-specific applications of this role.

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