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Asian Values In Journalism

By

Endy M Bayuni
Seminar on
Asian Values in Journalism
Kuala Lumpur, Aug 24-25, 1995

by
Endy M. Bayuni
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1. First of all, let me say what a great honor it is for me to be here among top mass communication experts as well as journalists from the region. I was asked -- I might add, at the last minute -- to represent one of the original speakers, Mr. Abdul Razak, the permanent secretary of the Confederation of ASEAN Journalists (CAJ) and a fellow countryman, who could not make it here because of another speaking engagement in Manila.

I realize that my expertise and experience in the field is not as impressive as those of Mr. Abdul Razak, but given the trust that Mr. Abdul Razak and this seminar organizers have placed on me to fill in his place, I shall do my best to contribute to this discussion to the best of my ability.

2. Now on the topic of today's seminar, "Asian values in journalism!" Do they exist and what are they? Rather than trying to attempt to answer the question -- which I think will be best left to the discussion later -- I will try to relate to this floor some of my own experiences in the way we select and present news at The Jakarta Post, and try to determine whether or not Asian values, or more specifically Indonesian values, have any bearings on our editorial decisions.

3. Let me first relate to you the following anecdote as an illustration of how values affect the way we decide on our news selection and presentation. During the Second APEC Summit in Indonesia last November, which many of you will recall was attended by American President Bill Clinton, a group of young East Timorese occupied the parking compound of the American Embassy building in Jakarta. Their chief objective was to draw publicity about their quest for a separate state from Indonesia, from the horde of journalists representing the big international media who were in town. The Jakarta Post sent a reporter and a photographer to the scene, and we ran the story the next day of a length approximately 25 cm (around 10 paragraphs), on the inside page, along with other APEC stuff. We were asked by some of the foreign (Western) journalists about why we didn't run it on the front page, or give it a larger coverage. "Was it censorship or official pressure?" they asked. It was neither. Rather, it was our conscious decision not to let the incident overshadow the story of the day. Sure, the embassy occupation was newsworthy, but it was not big enough to steal the main story of that day, which was the presence of 18 APEC leaders in Jakarta for a conference to discuss the future of the region. I think values played a role in the way we decide to present that particular story on that day. We could have easily given a larger coverage and placed it on the front page. But we decided against it.

A few weeks later, when the young demonstrators left the embassy compound to go on an exile to Portugal, we gave it a front page treatment, because indeed it was one of the major stories of the day.

4. While we may ascribe to a certain set of values, there is one thing that all press publications, newspapers and magazines, all over the world -- perhaps with the exception of those owned by governments -- have in common: Everyone is in the business of selling news. The way we select and present news is affected by commercial considerations, and these very often override some of the values, "the Indonesian values, or Asian values", that we profess to ascribe.

Let me just cite some examples: Some newspapers and tabloids in Indonesia run lurid pictures of half-naked young woman that could offend the sense of propriety and modesty of the traditionally conservative and religious Indonesians. Some newspapers run
bombastic and sensational headlines. All of these with the intention of attracting readers. These may be extreme examples. But even respected press publications in the country, every now and then fall into the same trap, whether consciously or not, of running bombastic and sensational headlines and stories, in the hope of making their paper more attractive.

The point is simple. They have to sell news, and this often means putting aside values and principles. This is particularly even more true in a country where there is a fierce competition in the media industry, including television, for readership and audience. Everybody is under pressure, television stations for ratings, and newspapers and magazines for readerships.

Lurid pictures and sensational headlines are characters, or probably negative side effects, of press freedom, and they are not the exclusive domain of the Western press. They are found in Asian newspapers, in varying degrees. Even in Indonesia, where people are relatively more religious and conservative, you can find such magazines.

5. Having said that, there are factors that actually restrain the print and broadcast media from publishing or broadcasting anything they like for the sake of boosting rating or readership. One of them is official censorship, and if this doesn't exist as in the case of Indonesia, there is self-censorship. Here, values play a major role in some of our editorial decisions.

Before I go on, I should explain to this forum that there is no official censorship in Indonesia. What we have is a government which controls the life (and death) of press publications through a licensing system. Simply put, it means that if a newspaper trespasses the line, whatever that may be, it stands to lose its license, which virtually means its closure. This is what happened to three news magazines last year. They were closed down. The yardstick used by the authority is stability, if you are deemed to endanger stability (and this is very subjectively determined), then you get reprimanded, or closed down after a series offenses.

In such an environment, newspaper editors have to censor their stories before they go to print. Putting political aspects aside (I notice the political environment will be discussed in a different session in this seminar), in the absence an official censorship, we editors have some liberty in deciding what to publish and how to present the news. Our values therefore are important determinants in many of our decisions in news selections and in presentation. These values certainly act as constraining factors, most notably on such issues of pornography and sadism.

6. Given the consensus of no official censorship, the press industry and the government in Indonesia together have coined the phrase "free and responsible press", which essentially means that you have freedom, but you also have responsibility. It comes with the territory. You cannot simply say "let's publish this article and damn the consequences". Given the power that the media have in forming public opinions, I fully share this as a concept.

The press can stir up people's emotions. As an illustration, take the recent case in Indonesia of when the press went overboard about the gang rape of a woman and her two teenage daughters. The media really played up the story for days, stirring up people's emotions that even a cabinet minister and a respected judge reacted by calling for the death sentence on the yet untried perpetrators. But as one woman activist later pointed out, this rape case became a celebrated one only because newspapers made it so. There had been
other rape cases before which were even more brutal because the victims were murdered, but they did not receive the same treatment by the media.

But just think, that if there are no restraints, the media decided one day to hype up the story of a family of Chinese descent torturing their indigenous Indonesian maid. We will be having an anti-Chinese riot in no time. It sure is a headline grabber that will sell newspaper. But it's an irresponsible one.

I don't mean to say that we should refrain from publishing sensitive stories, because that is withholding information from the public. But there are ways of presenting news in a more responsible way. For example, there is no need to highlight the fact that it is a Chinese family. After all, some Indonesian indigenous families are also torturing their maids.

Racial and ethnical relations in a country as diverse as Indonesia are still very sensitive that playing up their differences could be a very dangerous game. Religion is another very sensitive subject that journalists in Indonesia have to treat with the greatest caution.

The breaking up of Soviet Union and Yugoslavia into parts along ethnic lines serve as a fresh reminder to Indonesia that exploiting ethnic and religious differences could be fatal.

There have been cases in the past when some of the racial, ethnic and religious conflicts were caused by the press or at least were fanned by them. These conflicts were destructive and usually take a long time to heal.

So although there are no official censorships, the press in Indonesia know that they have to treat with caution stories that are deemed as politically explosive. Here, I think the values adhered to by editorial members are crucial in their decisions.

7. The international (Western) media do not face these constraints, but they do not necessarily reflect the reality in the field. They too have their own biases and prejudices.

Let's take a look at the way they treat Indonesia.

How often times have we read in the international wires references to East Timor as a predominantly Catholic and Indonesian troopers as predominantly Moslem. What they don't tell you is that there are many Indonesian Catholics, and some of them are in key military and government positions, and serving in East Timor. Religion is not a factor in the conflict in East Timor except in the minds of some of the foreign journalists.

Another fallacy found in the international press reporting on Indonesia is the phrase the "majority Malay population", used in highlighting conflicts with ethnic Chinese community in Indonesia. Indonesia's 190 million population also counts on a sizable Melanesian people in the eastern part of the archipelago.

One of the traits often found in the reporting on Indonesia by foreign media is the tendency to oversimplify, or painting situation in black and white, such as Moslems against Christians, Malays against Chinese, Javanese against non-Javanese. These tend to distort the reality in the field.

This is not found only in their reporting of Indonesia, but also of other parts of the world.

The conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina is not a religious one, although the international media is making it appear to be like one, by labeling all Bosnians as Moslems. Although
they never bothered to label the religions of the Serbs and Croats, they still leave the impression that the conflict is a religious one.

What about the Moro separatist rebellion in the Philippines? Is it a really religious conflict, or is it a conflict between the Manila government and an ethnic group, the majority of whom are Moslems? But still, we see international wires indiscriminately using such pejorative phrases as "Moslem bandits" and "Moslem rapists" in referring to the Moro rebels.

8. I'd like to throw in one or two values which I think are characteristics to Indonesians, and may be Asians, and are crucial in our line of work in the journalistic field.

One of them is a desire for harmony and to try to avoid differences. Ironically, journalism as we know it today, strives on differences, conflicts. In short, newspapers are filled with more bad news than good news. "Good news, is no news" generally applies, rather than usual phrase "no news is good news". News about national development progress in general, while important, do not draw as much readers' attention as news about wars, natural disasters, demonstrations, or even murders and rapes.

How do you incorporate this value -- the desire for harmony -- into journalism? May be our discussion here could throw light on the answer.

Another value characteristic to Indonesians -- and this is probably a negative one -- is that they don't take criticisms too kindly. This is making our job in the press industry a rather difficult but a challenging one. How do we convey our criticisms against the government and its officials. Certainly we cannot do it in a confrontative manner, because that would be considered an insult. This is one of the reasons why Indonesian government officials despise the Australian media, because they are considered "insensitive" to Indonesian feelings. Some of you may still recall that in 1984 Indonesia issued a blanket ban against all Australian journalists from visiting the country, because of a series of articles by Sydney Morning Herald's senior editor David Jenkins critical of President Soeharto. Things have improved a lot since then, but the backlash against the Australian media still occur every now and then.

This does not mean that we are not critical of our government. The press in Indonesia are still critical of the government, but we have to convey our message in a more persuasive manner. The Indonesian way, as we call it. It eventually boils down to how we write and present our articles. That has become the challenge and I think many people in the Indonesian press industry have developed a knack for it. I'm not sure whether this could be considered as Asian values in journalism, but may be this is something that this seminar might want to take up for discussion.

9. As a final point, the rapid globalization process is affecting the media industry in all of Asia. Indonesia is no exception. Press freedom blossomed in Indonesia beginning in the 1990 but it suffered a set back in 1994 with the closure of the three news magazines. Since then, we have slowly resumed on the path towards more openness and more press freedom. Certainly, issues that were once considered as taboo are now being freely debated in the press, and the views of some of the government's staunchest critics, previously barred, are now being widely reported. This is the positive aspect of the press freedom. But we have to be careful because there is a danger that we might depart from some of the
values that have served as essential restraining factors in journalism, such as the sense of
deecency and modesty, as we push the line of press freedom.