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Socio And Cultural Influences On Journalism Values In Asia:
From The Perspective Of Indonesia

By

Zulkarimein Nasution
SOCIO AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON JOURNALISM VALUES IN ASIA  
- From the perspective of Indonesia

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There is no doubt that socio and cultural influence could be found in every aspect of people's life. How then it influence journalism values could be explained if we refer to one of the basic communication principle, that is frame of reference of the communicator and the communicant should have certain commonness. As a matter of fact, way of life, culture as well as values are the main contributors to our frame of reference. They are also the ingredients of a person’s common experience. For we know, that media not only informs, it influences. Every message we see or hear, shapes the way we see ourselves, our understanding of the world.

It is not an easy task to describe the socio-cultural influence in Indonesian context, because Indonesia is a country of different social and cultural make-up. In fact, what could be presented here might be no more than trying to analyse them empirically based on a quick look at the daily news item published in the newspaper.

The state of sociocultural influence on journalism values can be understood in two related aspects as follows:

First, by looking at the historical background of the society concerned. Second, by identifying dominant socio cultural values that influences people activities.

During the Dutch colonialization period in Indonesia, people in general got suppressed. There was almost no habit of criticizing or protest. People tend to kept silence. There were almost no tradition of criticism at that time. This situation will then affect the way people look at themselves and their leaders. The leader or official position were viewed as "untouchable" one. No one dare to take a risk to challenge those masters, because even a normal response could be interpreted as a sign of opposition.

Within the Javanese culture there are two principles that has high value within Javanese culture namely harmony and respect.

The preference toward harmony resulted in a habit of avoiding conflict. This is because Indonesian society is a communal one, not individual. In this kind of society, it is very important for everyone to be tolerant.
The second principle is respect toward the leader and the elder. This attitude expressed in the way people believe their leaders. This mainly because relationship between the leader and the follower are based on trust. The relationship also patron-client and parent-child oriented. Consequently there is no control in this kind of relations. Control would be perceived as an expression of unbelievable, and further as no respect toward the leader. Control even could be assumed as a form of conflict, or at least leading the way toward a conflict between the leader and the follower.

The positive side of this type of relationship is that the leadership becomes effective. Primarily because there are almost no critics. Loyalty and obedience to the leaders become main features of this relationship.

Because the press also part of the society, it also subjected to this type of relationship. The press is obliged to refrain from aping the western-style of muckraking. Negative reporting about national leaders is seldom found in newspapers. For one thing, even without the ban, the press would normally "be more respectful of its national leaders that its Western counterparts are of theirs", said Awanohara in his article in *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

In term of journalism in Indonesia, the influence could be found at least in three ways: the way of treating the news, choice of words, and choice of angle. Besides, there are ways of saying things indirectly, such as conveyed through "non-serious" rubrics known as pojok or corner. In this way, critics are stated in a humor ways, so that nobody will get insult.

The way of treating the news or event. In the way of treating news, there is a trend to avoid a thorough investigation on certain "sensitive" issues. There seem to be certain "limit" to what extent an issue could be explored. Sometimes there were also tendency to narrowing or localize an issue. To some extent this also affects the way of perceiving newsworthy of an event.

Choice of words. In order to express thing in a subtle way. Could be illustrated in usage word such as "to save", "to adjust" where the real meaning is simply to detain and to increase price.

Choice of angle. Each news/issue started from certain viewpoint. There is an angle. This way of looking things certainly must be influenced by socio-cultural values.

Criticism by the press are largely adressed to the elite and decision makers. In this respect, editors believe in the effectiveness of indirect and allusive style of commentaries rather than in the confrontational manner. The style ensures that conflicting views are aired in the same forum and allows the press to "talk to" government people in a persuasive manner. The style also allows the press "to raise social conflict from the plane of violence to the plane of discussion" in its search for a better way of solving social problems.
The indirect style conforms with the dominant communication culture in Java. Elliot S. Parker, an American scholar, says "the Indonesian press is very much of the Javanese social fabric. The social norms value circumspection, self-restraint and the practice of saying the truth gently and with as little purpose to hurt as possible". For cultural reasons criticism "must be couched in very subtle terms, depending on obscurant language, the use of new words, or the use of old words in slightly different context". This means that aggressive journalism is considered insensitive and crude. Readers are used to, and comfortable with, reading between the lines.

In specific terms, a responsible press is expected by law, not merely by professional ethics, to refrain from fanning emotions based on racial, religious or "social groups" sentiments. The press, in general, understands the official concern that the media could accentuate and aggravate social or racial divisions, particularly in times of crises, even if their news reporting is factually and objectively correct and truthful. According to the official line, responsibility also demands that the press safeguards the good name and authority of national leaders, to refrain from slandering or insulting them.

Asian Values

The socio-cultural influences on journalism values in Asia became an interesting topic lately, and had been presented in several occasions. Although every nation in this region has its specific characteristics, there are some common values that are recognized by almost all society, among others preference toward harmony, and sense of respect to the elder and leaders. There were cases, that shows some of the journalism practices in the West are not accepted here.

Oetama (1955) stated that there are Asian values in journalism. There are manners that journalist in this region have to live up to. It is reflected in the way words and the tone selected in their sentences. There are ways and styles known as between the lines in exercising critics. According to Elliott (1995), the term "Asian values" has become a familiar catchphrase in recent years. It has been used to explain differences in political systems, economic growth, and human rights decisions to name but a few areas of application. But is there such a thing as an distinctly Asian value system? If there is, what then is the nature of that distinct system? And how do these Asian values affect mediated communication?

A great deal of discussion regarding Asian values has resulted mainly because of political and economic questions, but the impact on and the effect of mass mediated communications has been considered as well. Efforts have been made to define Asian values in communication as well as to determine what implications of this definition may mean.

Chu (1988) noted general dissatisfaction with Western approaches to communication and began to consider a scope of reference for something distinctly Asian, but did not really define characteristics of an Asian perspective of communication.
Dissayanake (1988) pointed to the classical intellectual traditions of Asia as a starting place for an Asian approach to communication, noting that these ‘traditions of Asia contain many useful concepts that can trigger exciting new thinking’.

Chitty (1993) established that there were realms in which both universal and specific Asian values might operate concurrently for the same national or cultural group, thus allowing for both approaches to values to apply at once.

However, a weakness in this discussion has consistently been that there is no clear definition of “Asian values”. Is there a commonality in the values among Asian countries?

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By way of conclusion

The positive values of socio cultural should be developed because the existing social institutions that is deeply rooted is a national asset which should be preserved. Those values are the characteristics and visions that reflect the national aspirations. While the negative values should be discarded because they obstruct progress and national development.

There is need to study and further develop these positive values chiefly to avoid Asian journalism from always look towards their Western counterparts which has different socio cultural setting and background, and therefore different interest and mission.

In addition to that there is also need to convince our Asian fellows journalist that they should not feel inferior, only because they have different ways of practicing their profession compared to their Western counterpart.

So the development of Asian values in journalism as mentioned above is also very relevant to the process of making nations in the region become mature. Above all, if we really want to make our society mature, we should start with the press first.
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