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Value Formation In Journalism Education In Asia: The Case Of The Department of Communication, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

By

Mohd Dhari Othman
Value formation in journalism education in Asia: The case of the Department of Communication, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
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Introduction
Journalism was introduced in Malaysia by the British along with their colonial power in the late eighteenth century. The publication of the *Prince of Wales Island Gazette* (printed by a printing press brought in by A. B. Bone from Madras, India) in 1806 marked the beginning of the adoption of the European concept of journalism in Malaysia. Printing press and editors were brought in from England or India to the Straits Settlements and the Malay States. These editors took the responsibilities to gather news, edit and print them in the local newspapers. But the early newspapers predominantly served as means to reprint news stories and articles taken from the English newspapers published in England or India (Mohd. Dhari, 1992). Other vernacular newspapers which appeared later in the middle and late nineteenth century adopted similar method of newspaper publication and the concept and style of news writing. Later the editors began training their own reporters to gather local news through the apprentice system in which the new reporters learned the trade from senior reporters. This system proved to be effective as it ensure that the cadet reporters acquired the standard as well as the methods and style of reporting and writing set by the editors of the newspaper (A. Kadir Jasin, 1984). This method of training new journalists is still being practiced in Malaysia to this day.

However, since the establishment of the School of Mass Communication of the MARA Institute of Technology in 1969, journalism courses are being offered at the institutes of higher learning in the country. This was followed by the Communication Programme of the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Pulau Pinang in 1970 and the Department of
Communication in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 1976.

**Journalism Education**

This paper seeks to examine the journalism programme of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia on how the students are trained to be journalism professionals in the country's newspapers. Hopefully, the discussion will lead to highlight some of the questions of how journalism education in Malaysia shapes the values of the future journalists. This paper will discuss four distinctive parts of the journalism training programme. They are (1) the writing skills, 2) issues in communication, 3) scientific research in communication, and 4) other bodies of knowledge acquired by the students.

1) **The Writing Skills**

The aim of the journalism programme in the Department of Communication at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia is to train the students to become professional journalists in the local media institutions. In order to achieve this aim students are required to take professional courses such as news reporting and editing, feature writing, opinion writing, newspaper production, newspaper management, media laws and photojournalism. These courses are offered in the second through fourth year of their bachelor programme. In addition, the students are also required to undergo a practical training in news reporting and writing in local newspapers for two months during university vacation after they have completed third year session. This is the first part of practical training programme for the students. The second part begins in the fourth year when all the journalism major sit on the board of editorial of *Nadi Bangi*, the student monthly newspaper (news magazine). At the same time the students conduct research on topics related to journalism. The report of this research project is compiled as an academic exercise (equivalent to a thesis) to be submitted as a partial requirement for the degree of bachelor of arts.

In the writing courses the students learn techniques of news, feature, and opinion writings. The students are taught how to evaluate news, conduct interviews, write leads,
use quotes, the differences between writing hardnews and feature stories as well as writing the editorial and other opinion writings. Here the Western concept of news writings is adopted and most of the text books used are those of the English and the American versions. In fact almost all the reference books used are published in America or Britain. This is not a surprise to journalism education in the country as most of the journalism teachers were trained in America and some in Britain.

In the Department of Communication of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, there are four journalism lecturers who are American university graduates. Three have bachelor degrees from local universities and one from an American university. All have masters degree in journalism from American universities. Two obtain Ph.Ds from local universities and one from an American university. This indicates a strong bond and influence of journalism education in the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia by the American schools. The situation is almost similar if we were to compare to those in the MARA Institute of Technology and Universiti Sains Malaysia, the two other schools which have journalism programmes.

There is no doubt that the journalism training programme in the institutes of higher learning in Malaysia is fashioned to that of the American model and in terms of journalistic values the local journalism schools are very much involved in the formation of the Western concept of news. As a matter of fact, the adoption of the Western concept of news by the local journalism training programme in the institute of higher learning is in line with the practice of the local newspapers. The graduates are expected to be able to be absorbed by the newspapers without further retraining in basic news reporting and writing, except in matters concerning the in-house style which needs to be adjusted to suit to the standard practices of the particular newspapers. The new reporters are expected to acquire the in-house style which may differ to a certain extent from one newspaper to another.

Even in news writing and reporting the students are expected to further sharpen their writing skills when they begin their job as journalists in a newspaper. The reason is that the practical training was unable to provide adequate writing practices to the students as they have extremely limited time during their undergraduate years. Practical news writing
is essential to the journalism students. As soon as the Department of Communication began offering journalism programme in 1976, practical training was made compulsory to every communication student. At present all the students are sent out for attachment with newspaper institutions for two months during inter-sessions vacation.

As the vacation time was too short to provide adequate training, the students are required to continue training on campus by getting fully involved in the production of the department's student monthly magazine (newspaper in tabloid size). The work involves news reporting and writing, editing, page designing, pasting-up, and making arrangement with the printer. The students work on the newspapers until it is mechanical ready after which the layouts are sent to the printer to be filmed and printed.

2) Issues in Communication
In addition to the practical aspects of the journalistic practices, students of journalism are also exposed to courses which dealt with the issues of communication to provide them with a broader understanding of the nature of human communication, its strength and weaknesses, and the problems it poses to the society. In the first year the students study the basic of communication, its process and nature, and the various aspects and types of communication. In another course during the second semester, the students study the role of the mass media in modern society. Some of the theories of communication were discussed, especially the four theories of the press, in order to understand the functions and workings of the press in the various political system of a society.

The course provides the students with the understanding of the concept and theory of the press in regard to its roles in democracy as compared to other political systems such as in communism and totalitarianism. In fact, the variations of the practices of the press in democratic societies are also discussed with special references to the strengths and weaknesses of the libertarian and social responsibility theory of the press. In this context the Malaysian press system is also discussed to highlight similarities and differences of the local system to the other systems in democratic societies. Special attention is also given to the issue of media contents in commercial television, especially, on programmes that
portray violence, horror, sex, and counter culture (VHSC) and review the findings of the research works by scholars on the effects of such television programmes especially on children.

The basic knowledge on the functions of the mass media in society prepares students to examine in more details on specific topics related to the restraints on the freedom of information and media practices as imposed by the government through legislation. The problems of the imbalance of communication flow between nations in the international arena are also highlighted. Courses on communication law and international communication are offered to provide deeper understanding among students on the working of Malaysian laws and the problems of the flow of information from and between countries. In the law course students are introduced to the constitutional laws as well as civil laws with particular emphasis on the aspects of the laws that directly or indirectly affect the freedom of expression. The department hopes that courses of such nature would be useful to students not only in understanding the legal system of the country but also to enable them to work within the limit of the laws when they later become journalists.

The problems of the imbalance of information flow across borders is compounded by the rapid development of communication technologies. Although the question of cultural imperialism through international communication has been a hot topic of discussion in the international forums for more than three decades, it is still a major concern of many third world nations. First is the concern over the distorted images of the people of the third world nation as portrayed in the Western mass media as opposed to the dearth of news items about the development of the third world countries in the Western mass media. Second, on the other hand, there is the concern over the problem of the influx of Western media items in the third world media, which is now being aggravated by the availability of television signals through hundreds of telecommunication satellites orbiting over the skies of the globe.

Yet in a seminar offered at the fourth year, students present short papers to discuss similar communication issues. These may include the debate on the form and nature of freedom of the press in the country, weighing between the good and evil of such a system
as practiced in the West and then debate on the question of how developing countries like Malaysia have to adopt and adapt certain characteristics of the Western concept of freedom of the press. The objective of the seminar is to make students aware that freedom of the press may be interpreted in many ways by people from different countries so much so that there are various systems of the press with significant variations of practices even in those countries which claimed to be democratic. As such there is no standard practices of press freedom, although the West claim theirs to be the best and the model to be emulated by other nations throughout the world. The West, especially the Americans, is so eager to impose these values on the press system and freedom of speech and expression of other nations. Those nations which failed to adhere to the criteria set by the West are liable to be coerced through trade, economic, and diplomatic sanctions.

In a multicultural, multilingual, and multicommunal society like Malaysia, the concept of the freedom of expression and rights of the individuals as practiced in the West may not be totally acceptable. Freedom of expression may not mean anything to the people if a country is plagued with civil wars, mistrust, and animosities between ethnic or religious groups. Freedom of the press may not be beneficial to the people if they have to live in fear of being attacked by other groups. The role of the press in Malaysia is to work hand in hand with the government to develop the country, to educate the people, to bring prosperity to the nations and thereby raising living standard of the people. Malaysians choose to place greater emphasis on societal rights as opposed to individual rights. This belief is premised on the assumption that once the societal right has been widely accepted by the people indirectly the right of the individuals who are the building blocks of the society will be protected.

There are other issues which could be highlighted by the students in the seminar. One such issue is the concern of parents on the social effects of foreign as well as local television programmes on children. The concern is on the proliferation of television programmes depicting scenes of violence behaviors, horror, sex, and counter culture. Does the portrayal of VHSC elements in the local television has an effect on the children's behaviour? The topic of media violence, horror, sex, and crime has been widely debated
among communication scholars, but it seems that there is no definite answers to solve the problems and the situation perpetuated.

The objective of this seminar is, then, to sensitize the students to ponder upon these sticky problems and examine the reasons behind the popularity of such programmes on television and the rationale taken by television stations to air those programmes in the context of the rapidly changing broadcasting policies of the government. Will these problems become more problematic as more and more private television stations are established in the future in light of the possibility of a more severe rating war to occur in the local television industry?

The broad issues of communication, media, and the audience are brought to the students’ attention so that they are aware of the nature of the professional environment they are about to enter. To that end it is also pertinent for them to understand the working environment of media organizations. Students who wish to make journalism a career are strongly encouraged to take a course in newspaper management in which they are introduced to the various aspects of news organization management. Included in the course are the discussion on the development of newspaper and other news agency organizational management. This course is offered to the fourth year students.

3) Scientific Research in Communication

As professionals, journalists gather information, facts, and figures, and often times seeks opinions from various sources to be passed on to their readers/audience. News items are the journalists’ commodity. Some of these information are readily available to the reporters, but others have to be discovered by themselves. Many of the available data are presented in the form of research reports and some are waiting to be researched. It is in this scenario, the Department of Communication requires journalism students to not only know how to read and interpret research findings as presented by the researchers, but also to understand the underpinnings of social scientific research and, when necessary, they themselves are able to conduct their own research projects.
All students in the Department of Communication, the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia have to conduct a research project the results of which will be reported and compiled as an academic exercise to serve as a partial requirement for the award of the bachelor of arts degree in the final year of their study. For the journalism major, research topic must be related to journalism. Courses such as communication theory, social statistics, and research methodology are the prerequisite to equip the students with research foundation and tools to conduct a research project. The research methods popular among students varies from time to time, but generally the most popular are content analysis of newspapers and magazines, survey of audience opinions, and historical accounts of newspapers or newspaper organizations.

With the deeper understanding of the philosophy of social scientific approach to knowledge among journalists and editors, the department hopes that the quality of reporting the opinion of readers or the public on social issues will improve and the views of the people as depicted by the media are correctly interpreted and fairly generalized. There were cases of news reports quoting results of spontaneous surveys of opinion conducted by reporters themselves on specific social issues. The sample consisted of three respondents and the results were generalized to the whole population of the country. This misleading results of spontaneous survey and the unrepresentative opinion of the population serve no justice to the general public. It could only be a justification to support the views or attitude of the reporters themselves or the editors of the newspapers regarding the issues.

The knowledge of social scientific research is also useful to the journalists to assist them in understanding and interpreting research reports, thereby forming the right perspective to write stories from such reports for the benefit of the readers. For example, reporting findings of a research is inadequate if it precludes the explanation on sampling techniques, the way the questions were constructed, method of administering the questionnaires, and other relevant information pertaining to the research project such as the researchers names and sponsors/financial support. These information is essential for the readers to evaluate the reliability and credibility of the news report. The primary
commitment of a journalist is to tell the truth, without which the credibility of the newspapers as information provider is at stake.

4) Other Bodies of Knowledge

The quality of journalism graduates may not entirely rest on the ability to write and report news stories in the daily affairs of their career as professional journalists. Rather, the entire performance depends partly upon the depth and breath of their knowledge about the people; the social, political, and economics system of the country; and the religious and cultural practices of the various groups that make up the human environment of the country. To prepare the foundation for such knowledge the students are required to take courses from other disciplines in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities. The first year students take two introductory courses from communication and two each from two other departments which may include Anthropology and Sociology, Geography, History, Linguistics, Malay Letters, Political Science, Psychology, Economics, and English Language.

As the level of their studies goes higher, the scope of their studies is narrower. Therefore, in the second and third year the student take courses from two of the three departments and in the fourth year major in one of the two departments. The objective of narrowing down the scope of the studies in this way is to allow the students to focus on the particular academic disciplines they are interested in. In the case of the communication students (including journalism students) they may take courses from one other department in the second and third year and major in communication (journalism) in the fourth year. After completing the undergraduate programme, the students are expected to have a strong foundation of the body of knowledge about the social, political, economic, and cultural background of the multiracial-racial society of the country.

Summary and conclusion

The objective of journalism education programme in the Department of Communication, the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia is to train journalism professionals who have a broad
based education in the social sciences and humanities. The courses offered can be divided into four integrated segments. They are 1) courses which provide professional training (such as the skills of writing and gathering news), 2) courses that discuss current issues about journalism and communication, 3) courses that provide a broader perspective in understanding the society, and 4) courses that prepare students with the tools of scientific inquiry which can be useful in gathering information and writing news.

It has also been noted earlier that the whole concept of journalism, the technology we used and the methods of presenting news and information through the newspapers from the early history of journalism in this country is Western in origin. The Western values imbued in the journalistic tradition in this country is going to stay put for a long time to come. This has become part of us. With the globalisation of communication, trade, and commerce in the present and the future of international relations among nations, the Western values in the international journalism will be strengthened. However, as our nations progress, our people are well educated, our societies become more sophisticated, despite the world becoming a global village, we as educators have to recognize the differing views and beliefs among nations on the roles of journalism to suit to the needs to develop the people. And definitely, each of these nations has its own priority. As for Malaysia the priority is to develop the people socially and economically, to foster greater integration between the various ethnic groups to form a single Malaysian race, to maintain a stable political system, and to participate on equal footing with other nations in the international trade and political forum. It is believed that freedom of speech, if practiced to the extreme, would do more harms than goods to the society. Thus we see the existing of the various legislation, curbing the freedom of speech in the country.

Priorities and needs of a society change over time. As we progress, as the industrialized countries have experienced, the views and beliefs about the roles of journalism in a country may also change. Journalism education in the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, in particular, and in other institutions of higher learning in this country in general, take stocks of the nature and characteristics of the Malaysian society, and its ideals and goals. The values we pass on to our would be journalists must be
suitable to the ideology of the mainstream views on national development of the country. The philosophy of journalism education in this country is based on this premise. The students are required to master the skills needed in the journalism profession and they are also led to accumulate adequate knowledge of the political, social, cultural, and economic system of the nation. The values about the roles of journalism in the society that we learned from the West are weighed against the values imbedded in the culture and the aspiration of the people in this country.

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