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Asian Values In Journalism,
Or Values In Asian Journalism?

By

Asad Latif
JOURNALISTIC integrity is a universal value, but authenticity is a local one.

The spirit of enquiry, concern for accuracy, and the attempt to present diverse viewpoints on an issue in order to reflect its complexity: these values are universal, no matter how badly they are mauled in practice, whether in the West or in Asia. Professional integrity demands respect for them, whether one is an Asian or a Western journalist.

Authenticity is rather different. It involves the effort to situate one's work, to place it in context. That context is local.

The journalist from the West may not run afoul of the principles of the profession, but he may run aground in Asia all the same. That is because he represents -- re-presents -- the world to Asians in a continuing ""dialectic of information and control'' whose origins are essentially Orientalist. (Edward Said, Orientalism, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1985, p. 33.) He cannot represent the world to Asians as an Asian. He can be, and usually is, a person of integrity; authenticity is a different challenge.

It is against this background that the case for an ""Asian reading of Asia'' can be advanced. (Cheong Yip Seng, The Straits Times, 17 February 1994.) As a media critic put it, ""Asians can no longer accept the roles assigned to them in a play scripted in the centres of power. They must now be able to write their own scripts. This perspective empowers Asians to be responsible for their own image to their own people and the international audience.' (Yeap Soon Beng, ""The Emergence of an Asian-Centred Perspective: Singapore's Media Regionalization Strategies'', Media Asia, Vol 21, No. 2, 1994, p. 66.)

What that entails is no less than a struggle with textuality, an attempt to fashion a new narrative, to chart the Asian terrain against indigenous points of reference. Like his literary counterpart, who leaves behind an imaginative record, the journalist provides a record through reportage. The Asian journalist is called upon to re-report Asia and the world for Asians, and Asia and Asians for the world.

In doing so, she or he runs up constantly against the sub-texts at work in the Western narrative. Rarely do these amount to explicit misreporting; when they do, they are relatively easy to counter. The problem with sub-texts is that they are more subtle, and hence insidious. They are present not only in what is said, but often in what is left unsaid. Both must be contested by saying what needs to be said.

It is better therefore to speak of, not Asian values in journalism, but values in Asian journalism which hopefully help to make its practice authentic, challenging and worthwhile. It would be presumptuous for a single journalist working in one part of Asia at a particular stage of its development to prescribe a set of values because to be meaningful, they must be applicable. Their application will reflect, as it must, the economic, political, linguistic and cultural diversity of Asia; the distinction between print and broadcast journalism; the language of the publication; its nature, from mainstream newspapers to tabloids; and the target audience -- to say nothing of the vicissitudes of proprietorial control.

Nevertheless, it appears possible to hope for an Asian reading of Asia relatively free of the assumptions and agendas which encumber the Western text.
It is essential to start by noting that the question of values in journalism is part of a debate being waged against the backdrop of Asia's accelerated economic transformation and its changing state-society relations. Not all parts of the continent are being transformed, of course; change is felt most keenly in East Asia (including Southeast Asia). But the East Asian experience, in mass communication as in other areas of life, is evolving into a model of development journalism whose crucial difference from earlier models is that it is based on national economic strength, not weakness, in a capitalist system whose globalising logic it embraces eagerly, unlike the Third World's earlier defensiveness towards, if not rejection of, globalisation as alien and threatening. The East Asian media speaks increasingly with confidence from a position of strength.

Within this framework, Asian journalists are confronted with an avowed tension between their roles in economic and political development. This is an old issue, of course, but its cutting edge has grown sharper because of massive and sustained economic liberalisation in post-Cold War Asia, and the investment and trade flows which are shifting the centre of economic gravity to this part of the world. Should Asian journalists continue to advance national economic interests?

It is impossible to deny that, in East Asia certainly, what is known broadly as the Confucian brand of journalism has contributed to an astonishingly successful marshalling of human resources for economic growth. The justification for the media's enabling role is that social and political stability are an essential requisite for rapid economic growth. A correspondence of interests between the state and the media contributes to that stability, and hence to economic development from which society as a whole benefits. The media seeks economic survival, as the state seeks political survival. If society benefits as a result of their coming together, no honour is lost in this cooperation.

Arguments in favour of this rather symbiotic role draw on the fact that the media is a part of culture, and cultural values do help determine the comparative advantage of nations. Extrapolating from Max Weber's study of the Calvinist work ethic's contribution to capitalism, scholars have found in Confucian values a key to the economic resurgence of East Asia. Though others have disagreed, a study published in the Strategic Management Journal in 1991 went so far as to say that """"differences in cultural values, rather than in material and structural conditions, are ultimate determinants of human organisation and behaviour, and thus of economic growth"""". Values may not be sufficient to ensure growth but, everything else being equal, they can make an invaluable difference. (Asad Latif, """"The cash value of values"""", The Straits Times, 8 October 94.) Of course, it is difficult to quantify the contribution the media makes (or does not make) to growth but, proponents of this view argue, it is not wrong for it to adopt a pro-growth attitude and uphold the system which makes growth possible.

Eamonn Fingleton captures the essence of the process at work in Japan. In his book, Blindside: Why Japan Is Still on Track to Overtake the U.S. by the Year 2000, he says that the Japanese press """"functions essentially as the establishment's highly efficient public relations department. To call Japanese journalists """"co-opted"""" is to belittle the fusion of identity between them and the civil servants. Like the the civil servants, the journalists are good Confucians... (In) a Confucian society, top journalists are philosophically insiders helping other insiders to maintain harmony"""". (Houghton Mifflin, 1995, p. 181.)
So in South Korea, where, in spite of the press reforms of 1987, that model persists. In his monograph, Confucianism Defies the Computer: The Conflict within the Korean Press, David E. Halvorsen is critical of "Confucius: Editor-in-Residence." Whereas "American journalists view themselves as surrogates of the people," he says, the Korean journalist "considers himself as part of the ruling class, not the voice of the people... (He) sees himself as an advisor to the royal court. That advice can be critical as well as praiseworthy." (East West Centre, Honolulu, June 1992, p. 14.)

The corporatist view that newspapers must be biased towards success underpins the compact between the media and the state in Malaysia and Indonesia, too, though the Philippines revels in an adversarial style of journalism.

In multiracial Singapore, the argument for a kind of Confucian journalism is made less from traditional culture, and more from the need to create a culture of winning economics. Cheong Yip Seng, Editor-in-Chief of the English and Malay Division of Singapore Press Holdings, underscored the need for this partnership at a seminar on Asian Values and the Role of the Media in Hongkong. Journalism, he declared, "is a business." "With the end of the Cold War, countries are jockeying for competitive positions in trade and business. Newspapers cannot stand aloof from the competition. For their own good, they have to carve out a role for themselves in this race. For their own good, they must help improve the competitive positions of their respective countries," he said. "Newspapers must decide what are their country's critical success factors and be biased in favour of promoting them." (The Straits Times, 3 December 94).

So much for economics, then. What about politics? In the post-Cold War era, the winds of liberalisation are not only economic: they are political, too. Bourgeois liberalism seeks to become the dominant ideology of the international system. Again, East Asia's experience within that system is interesting. It shows how the satisfaction of economic, or first-order, needs, lays the basis for second-order expectations, such as demands for greater political space and a quality of life in which non-economic factors play a more prominent role. Economic growth has created an ascendant Asian bourgeoisie whose affinities are broadly with liberalism. In this context, much is heard about the need for the media to affirm its role as part of civil society -- the extensive network of associations and institutions lying between the family and the state -- to further the liberal democratic cause. For it to fall short of that challenge is said to be an abdication of its historic role.

My own view is that it is possible for the Asian journalist to reflect the political development of her or his society without subscribing to the idea of inevitable convergence between the political trajectories of Asia and the West. Indeed, a great deal of scepticism is in order when assessing claims that the Asian media should be a partisan of civil society in its confrontation with the Asian state. One important source of that advice is suspect: notwithstanding its credentials as the voice of civil society, a fundamental identity of corporate interests binds the mainstream Western media to the state. (Edward Said offers an excellent analysis of how that convergence works in the United States in Covering Islam, and Noam Chomsky has written perceptively about the media's role in the "manufacture of consent" in society.) It is intriguing, to say the least, that those upholding the state in their own systems should berate the media for doing the same in Asia.

In a world where states are the primary unit of security for societies, and where their fate determine the distribution of international power.
international power, it would therefore be most unwise for the Asian media to embark on state-destroying when the media elsewhere continues with state-building. If Asian journalists are determined to proclaim the victory of civil society at the expense of the state, they will hurt only their own societies because, for all its vagaries, the state is necessary to resist the foreign penetration and pillage of indigenous societies in an era of closer global integration.

However, if they insist on viewing society through the celebratory lenses of the state, they would do well to learn from the fate of the media in the fallen Second World. Pravda, as it was, disappeared with the state which it had upheld by dismissing the palpable realities of Soviet society. It had cheated both state and society by lying to each about the other.

Post-Cold War journalists anywhere should know better.

In summary, it is possible to overstate both the economic allegiance and political calling of the Asian journalist, especially if they are framed in exclusive terms. That becomes worse if the argument from economic growth is identified with Asia, and that from political liberalisation with the West. In that case, the Asian journalist will ultimately have to take sides, either believing Francis Fukuyama’s announcement that history has ended (and liberal democracy has arrived as the single universal framework of reference), or heeding Samuel Huntington’s advice that a clash of civilisations is looming instead. If Fukuyama is correct, journalists, wherever we are, should become certified liberal democrats to take our place in the vanguard of post-history; and if Huntington is right, we should be scrambling to our assigned turrets from which to wage civilisational wars. But a journalist does not have to agree with the Fukuyama’s flamboyant triumphalism -- and his scour for alternative ideologies which he sees in the throes of defensive, desperate, rearguard action -- to notice how the quietly homogenising forces of globalisation are putting the world on a common ideological trajectory which reduces the force of Huntington’s dire predictions.

In Asia, as elsewhere, journalists need to review that dual drama. In doing so, they will confront the sub-texts at work in the Western media coverage.

Two sub-texts: Bad China and Mad Mullahs

It may be useful to examine two such sub-texts. They are not chosen at random, but exemplify the Western agenda in its engagement with Asia, particularly the two most intransigent systems resisting Western supremacy: China and the West.

A revealing media practice is the attempt to ""capture'' the essence of countries and systems in a few words or phrases in the course of a news despatch. This is supposed to familiarise the audience with distant realities and put them in context. But whose context? The context is not that of the country or system, but the one to which the newspaper, news agency or television station belongs -- which, for global media conglomerates today, is largely American (or effectively Americanised). The defining perspective is therefore that of an American or Americanised audience; the terms of the definition reflect their experiences, expectations and biases.

News answers to the agenda of the home audience and reinforces it. Beamed to, or circulated in, third countries, it tries to set the pattern for perceptions there as well.

There are three points to be made about these characterisations. First, they are palpably contentious. Whether China should be called ""communist'' is arguable, to say the least, when its ruling party is presiding over one of the greatest capitalist transformations in history. Whether ""Islamic fundamentalist'' is a meaningful description of diverse, contending and even clashing movements in the Muslim world is certainly open to question.
The second point is the intention behind these pious caricatures. Why are obviously partial terms used to sketch and then dismiss the lived reality of entire countries and systems? Why is "communist" used for China? It is because "communist" is a useful stick to beat China with. It invests the Chinese system with the excesses and follies of "communism" -- Ah, don't we know them all too well? -- without need for further explanation, qualification or modification. Surprisingly, Deng Xiaoping the patriarch was forgiven for being a "communist" when he launched his economic reforms; indeed, he was celebrated as the great economic liberator. It is only when he refused to "liberate" Chinese politics as well that he turned into a "communist" ogre. Swiftly, "communism" reclaimed him and cast a shadow over his system.

So for the trope "Islamic fundamentalist". Its pejorative intent is quite pointless because, for a person to be faithful, whichever the faith, he must be true to its fundamentals -- and hence a fundamentalist. But, like other coinages such as the unnecessary "Islamist" (why not the simpler "Muslim"?) and the silly "Mad Mullah" (But who makes the mullah go mad?), the nefarious label of "Islamic fundamentalist" serves as a convenient shorthand. It tars an entire community of the faithful with the terrorist acts of a small minority. If it is argued that "terrorist fundamentalists" justify their actions in the name of Islam, which they do, the counter-argument must be that "non-terrorist fundamentalists", the majority of Muslims, justify their abhorrence of terror, in the name of the same Islam. The point is a crucial one. But who is listening?

The third point is what the characterisations leave out. Consider China. Reading western news agency and newspaper despatches, which are fixated on the prospects of democratisation there, it is possible to wonder whether young Chinese ever fall in love; whether husbands and wives quarrel and then make up; whether peasants sing to their grandchildren; whether the Chinese people have any day-to-day, year-to-year or millennial concerns apart from "democracy". But how can they when, in Western media-speak, "democracy" is the very grammar of its China-talk? It reflects the home audience's expectations, the convergence they anticipate between their brand of liberalism and Chinese polity. China is indexed according to its position on an externally-imposed political trajectory.

But how far do the Chinese masses themselves see their country, their prospects and the future this way? What are the key issues for them? Might they be bold enough to have another index of development, to find fault with (or support) their government on other grounds? What do the Chinese think of China?

The Western media does not have the answer. That is not because it is incapable of finding it, but because it refuses to look for it, so well-behaved a prisoner is it of its own agenda.

Many other examples could be given, but these magisterial simplifications of Chinese and Muslim reality serve to make the point. It is that the purpose of the Western exercise is to uphold a hierarchy of normality. Like the Orientalist professoriate before it, the Western media attempts to contain and dominate the post-colonial "Other" within a framework of normality, and hence legitimacy, acceptable to the West. The net effect of its representations, based on American or Americanised models, is to show how other systems are "abnormal" to the extent that they deviate from the American "norm". Why it should be the norm is never explained; instead, the Americanised benchmark is taken for granted and posited as a "given", to which all other systems must approximate, usually do, or else break up in foolhardy and ill-advised collision.

This is unacceptable.
Towards another text

There is no escape from textuality. Thus, the mere attempt to deconstruct Western representations of Asia does not bestow automatic legitimacy on the Asian media's own texts. It has, no doubt, its own sub-texts, too.

But the construction of an alternative text is a legitimate activity to the extent that it is a more faithful representation of Asia as it is, rather than the Asia others want it to be. As re-presentation, the Asian text is not real, but as Asian, it is closer to reality than Western re-presentations can be.

Here, the Asian media, like all media, contributes to the construction of identities. In complex societies, not only do people grow increasingly dependent on the media for information about the world, the media offers them identities to choose, from among the communities presented on the page or the screen. (This is really an extension and a replay of the interaction between communication, community and communion that lies at the heart of the social experience.) By itself, that is legitimate, of course. Citizens must be free to choose their identities, from the political to the sartorial. But the critical question is whether the choices presented are genuine or apuristic.

That question bears on the idea of the nation-state. The nation-state, for all its existential limitations and coercive excesses, remains the primary political community, the fundamental unit of political allegiance today. The media has to recognise the fundamental reality of nationhood in the borderless global world of ideas, and shape its response to society accordingly. In fact, this is an interesting evolution of the role that the press played in the rise of modern nationalism. Benedict Anderson describes how vernacular print-capitalism helped erode classical communities spread over dynastic states linked by sacred languages, and replaced them with the imagined communities of modern nations. (Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Revised Edition, 1991, Verso, London and New York.) Though the nation and the media have evolved along different trajectories, a certain relationship endures.

Nations being imagined communities (though not imaginary communities), their resilience must depend on the reach and depth of the imagination. To succeed, society must vibrate with the resonance of its own voices, faults, efforts, hopes and desires. Free and honest communication -- among individuals, between individuals and groups, among groups, and between all these and the state -- is necessary. That communication lies directly in the domain of the media, within the wider matrix of culture. The media exists to make the private public. It serves to make the private imagination impinge on the public, simultaneously giving the private imagination a stake in the public.

In articulating the nation, the media runs up against the space of the state. A key aspect of the post-colonial state's penetration of society is its desire to monopolise, not merely the world of contingency, but that of meanings, too. One of its political aims is to create "its own world of meanings, which it aims to make so central that it aspires to affect all other worlds of meaning" existing in society. (Achille Mbembe, "Power and Obscenity in the Post-Colonial Period: The Case of Cameroon", in James Manor (ed.), Rethinking Third World Politics, Longman, London and New York, 1991, p. 166.)

This is why the media must not let the official voice dominate public debate by drowning out alternative voices. Not only does this have an enervating effect on the social, and particularly intellectual, climate of a country, a slavish press does even the state no good. Its own lack of credibility dilutes the message the state wants to send through it to the people.
Instead, Asian journalists contribute to Asia when they mediate in the dialogue between state and society. They do so by conveying messages from one to the other, and interpreting for each the language of the other: the state that of contingency and power, and the people that of need and freedom. A media becomes truly effective when the state suspects it of bias towards the people, and the people suspect it of bias towards the state. Both expect so much of it that nothing it does satisfies either. But though it leaves both unsatisfied, it remains their daily lifeline to each other. It is here that Asian scribes can depart from the hackneyed Western decree that government being a necessary evil, the only way to deal with it is as an adversary, wishing to have as little of it as possible and limiting its power with every word or image. Of course, a government can be evil, very evil, and when it is, the Asian journalist is compelled to say so. She or he will do so because of integrity, not Asianess. There is example after battered example of how Asian news has done just that, paying the price in gangster or police raids on work premises, attacks on and murders of journalists, and the ultimate sanction: the ban. How many Western hacks have suffered anything remotely similar for speaking up for Asia?

However, this is no reason to believe that journalists must live or die on the assumption that governments are necessarily evil. Why should a journalist be accused of a lack of integrity when he says, if he believes it to be true, that his government is honest and efficient? As a colleague put it in conversation, it is natural for journalists to be instinctively distrustful of authority. But if the empirical record does show a good government, he added, why should affirming this entail a loss of credibility?

At another, but related, level, why should only lifestyle choices associated with the West provide the intimations of freedom? Why cannot other lifestyles be celebrated for holding in them the protective mysteries of beauty, and companionship, and choice?

From the political to the personal, a refusal to be defensive about such things can be part of the Asian journalist's desire to play a role in the development of Asia.

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