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Qualities Deemed Necessary For Budding Journalists

By

Chong Saw Taf
QUALITIES DEEMED NECESSARY FOR BUDDING JOURNALISTS

By: Chong Saw Taf
Features Reporter
Sin Chew Jit Poh

I am one of those who could be called grass root journalists. I have no formal training in journalism and has gone through all the trial and error in the profession. So what I am trying to here is straight from my experience and observation, pertaining especially to the Chinese print media.

A wholesome journalist is one who has the skills, language proficiency, knowledge Analytical skills and the right attitudes in carrying out his or her work.

As far as these qualities are concerned, the following are deemed as vital:

1. A good grasp of languages: A good command of languages could not be over-emphasised. While to be bilingual is a basic requirement in the Malaysian context, being tri-lingual is necessary for the Chinese print media journalists.

   Language is the fact important for we discern that language proficiency among younger generation of journalists is declining.

   A good grasp of languages means not only a working knowledge, but a more subtle command. While this may not be feasible in the spoken languages, written proficiency should be well observed by any journalist.

   Without a good command of language skills, the budding journalists will tend to be handicapped in listening, expressing and presenting his or her write-ups.

   It is suggested that journalism courses should take a real hard look at this aspect of language proficiency because new graduates of this course show a poor grasp of language skills. More efforts should be geared towards brushing up language skills. More emphasis should be laid upon language training, both spoken and written.
2. An innate curiosity should be the part and parcel of any journalists, not the tendency to listen to gossip but to find out what is going on what he or she does not know. This should include a word whose meaning is not known, or a fact which is baffling.

Most of all, an urge to know, be it a desire to read periodical or an article. To act upon such curiosity can thus be deemed as a journalistic skill. A sense of professionalism and the awareness to learn and to improve such as taking up further course should be instilled.

3. To be jack of all trade but master of sort:

Budding journalists should show an interest in current affairs encompassing a wide spectrum of topics.

National and international developments covering social, political, economical, technical and scientific fields should be covered as far as is practical.

Journalists should not get carried away with the notion of "not my cup of tea", shunning topics which seem uninteresting or difficult. The tendency is to opt for leisure and entertainment in reporting, avoiding austere topics which seem to require good background knowledge.

Language skills without depth and content could be empty, a working knowledge of a wide spectrum of topics is always necessary, and courses should see to it that this aspect of the training has not been overlooked.

To be equipped with such spectrum of knowledge coupled with a sense of newsworthing means to be well prepared for the job.

4. Need of specialisation:

While one needs to keep an open mind to anything under the sun, one should also finds one's elements in certain fields, which means specialization in the midst of generalization.

Specialization helps one to find a niche in the midst of generalization.

The type of specialisation should be in line with the bent of the journalist concerned. One who is at home with the green issues, for instance, should be allowed to do in-depth reports. Specialist writers should be encouraged. Courses should identify such prospects of specialization.
4. As far as knowledge is concerned, not only knowledge of words and current affairs are important, ever practical aspects knowledge of places and streets are important. Communication courses should be geared towards these practical aspects of awareness.

Practical coaching should also take the form of tidy and systematic approach to work in journalism is important; many an assignment could be ruined because the reporter has no discipline or awareness of the time factor: not only time is tight for meeting dateline, time to allow for travelling is traffic jams is part of the wisdom of the profession. Poor performance due to lack of preparation, should be discouraged and college lecturers should emphasize the importance of doing their homework before a P.C or an interview.

The need to keep a record of one’s assignments: The dates of interviews, the persons interviewed, the contact phone numbers, should be kept.

Journalism courses could help to instill such awareness, although it is recognised that some of these considerations could only be fully gained through experience.

5. Awareness of the computer usage in modern reporting: The use of notebook, palmtop computer and the software in format layout should be instilled. For Chinese media, the use of Chinese software programmes in keying-in should be instilled.

Such programmes could even be part of the training of the budding journalist.

Mr. Chairman,

Some weaknesses of journalists are inherent in the profession, especially in the Chinese media.

1. There seems to be no proper screening of work produced, no post-assessment of performance or comparisons. This leads to a medicore style of performance.

2. Chinese or Tamil print media will necessarily incur the extra work of translation which tend to consume extra time and efforts.
The language barrier entails a lot more efforts than could be imagined. A case in point is the annual budget: while English or Bahasa media will have everything ready-made for them, leaving only the editing work, the Chinese or even the Tamil media for that matter will have to struggle with the translation as well as the editing.

The language barrier could well take another toll: One can always see that official news has always been dominated by Bahasa or English media reporters due to their seemingly language proficiency. While there can be exceptions, this trend could only be reversed by spoken language proficiency and a more aggressive style of approach to posing questions.

3. The chicken and egg issues always beset the profession: The wages of journalists have been deemed way below other profession and there are disparities of pays even in different media. For example, there seems to be a difference in the pays of English and Chinese newspapers' reporters.

While a search for excellence must be the requirement of any profession, the problem is: If the incentives are not too attractive, the spirit for improvement will be dampened.

When the pays are not too attractive, the financially battered journalists will start to look for side-income or even search for greener pastures. This will lead to brain-drain or less-than-ready commitments.

4. The journalists today not only have to be careful in its reporting, he or she might be torn between "displeasing" potential clients such as advertisers. This gives rise to favouritism of positive-only reporting mentality.

This will mean less leverage in one's reporting. Chinese media seems likely to succumb to this disadvantage due to the keen competition in soliciting and keeping advertisement clients.

5. The effects of reporting in the Chinese or Tamil media will necessarily be hampered due to the fact that only people who could read the language will the reporting.

The problems highlighted in the hotline columns for instance will have less influence that the same problem carried by English or Bahasa media newspapers for the simple fact that the latter could well be noticed by the authorities.
6. There seems to be a lack of incentive to provide for self-
   improvement or re-training due to financial constraint. While
   some has on-going training programmes for cadet or management
   staff, the room for improvement for the average journalist is
   never roomy enough.

Mr. Chairman,

I assume that what I have said though relevant to print media as
a whole, may be more relevant to the Chinese media. But it seems
that there are no Chinese institutions which have journalism
course being represented here. I would suggest that institutions
such as MIA (Malaysian Institute of Arts) be invited to forum of
this nature so that what is being expanded here could have the
right audience.

(END)